

SKIP THE DEFINITIONS!

For a number of years, a quarrel has been going on in some circles of science-fiction and fantasy readership.

Briefly, the whole thing revolves around the question: what is science-fiction — and how does it differ from fantasy?

The "purists" claim that science-fiction can only deal with present-day science, proven or provable, and its immediate results. The middle-of-the-roaders insist that any story that has a supposedly "scientific" premise is science-fiction. The extremists, a small minority, base their theories on the statement that science-fiction and fantasy are exactly the same thing—fantasy, after all, being only the science we don't have laws for yet.

These groups battle it out whenever they happen to meet. But not one of the fighters has yet asked the simple question: why all the argument?

After all, the purpose of either form is to entertain. Whether you're entertained by definition A5 or definition B-2MB doesn't seem to matter, so long as the definitions don't get in the way.

Thus, *Visitor from Nowhere* could be classified as either fantasy or science-fiction, depending on your point of view. B. Traven, the author, likes to think of it as fantasy. But we like to think of it as a good story—which it is, as you'll find.

N. R.'s story, of course, is fiction of a different calibre. The author is still living and uses no other name than his initials, not because he has no other name. While we don't usually reprint stories, we think you'll find this First Earth Publication of a deservedly famous Martian story well worth your interest.

In this second issue of *Cosmos*, we've tried to give you a balance of different types of stories. From fantasy like John Jakes' *With Intent to Kill*, science-fiction like *Shape-Up* by Jack Vance or *HOT SQUAT* by A. Bertram Chandler, to one of the solar system's favorites, *Terran Menace*—and the fine pair of articles, F. M. Turner's up-to-the-minute reportage and Dr. Robert S. Richardson's collection of literary oddities—we think it's a ten issue.

Thanks for agreeing with us so wholeheartedly on our initial issue. We hope you'll agree with us again about this second issue of *Cosmos*.

—The Editors

Cosmos Science Fiction and Fantasy

Vol. 1, No. 2

NOVEMBER 1953

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Publisher	J. A. KRAMER	Associate Editor	PHYLLIS FARREN
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Printed in the U. S. A.

*A strange story of the ancient Aztecs by the author of
TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE*



VISITOR FROM NOWHERE

By B. TRAVEN

I

A MEXICAN had sold me fifty acres of raw land located in the midst of dense trop-

ical bush. I'd paid him twenty-five pesos down, and the balance was to be paid on receiving the titles.

I built myself a sort of hut,

Indian fashion, and started cultivating the soil. It was no easy task, what with that jungle all around me, but anyway I started.

Soon I learned that I wasn't the only white man in that region. A one hour's ride on my pony brought me to my nearest neighbor—a Doctor Cranwell.

The village, inhabited by Indian peasants, was twelve miles away, and the depot was eighteen. Close to the depot, two American families were trying their luck. Besides farming, and buying and shipping charcoal and fuel produced by Indians, each of the families ran a sickly-looking general store.

Doc Cranwell's ranch was situated on a hill in the midst of the bush, just as was my own place. He was all by himself in a three-room, crudely constructed bungalow. I didn't know why he had buried himself in that jungle, and I never tried to find out. It was none of my business.

He did a little farming, or what he said was farming. He had a couple of cows, a couple of horses, three mules, and a score of beehives. Wild birds were after the bees all the time, catching them as they left or returned to the hives. That limited the bees' production to just enough for the doc to have some honey for breakfast now and then.

His closest neighbors were two Indian families who lived about half a mile from his ranch. The men were employed by him as farm hands, while their women attended to his little domestic affair.

He spent most of the time reading. When he wasn't reading, he just sat on the porch of his bungalow, staring down at the thousand square miles of jungle, spread out before his view in a cheerless color of dull, dusty green. It was a bright green only during four months of each year.

A score of Indian settlements, none consisting of more than three families, were scattered over that vast region, but the only way you could tell they were there was by the smoke which at certain hours of the day could be seen playing above those hidden *jacalitos*.

The average person could get tired, perhaps even go insane, if he had no other object to look at but such an immense space of gloomy jungle. The doctor, though, liked this view.

So did I. I could gaze over that jungle for hours on end without ever getting tired of it. It wasn't what I could actually see that interested me. It was being able to imagine the big and little episodes which were happening in those thorny thick-

ets down there. There wasn't a minute's rest in the eternal battle for survival; for love. Creation and destruction. . . . I wasn't sure, but I guessed that the doctor felt the same way. Only he never said so.

My place was on the same mountain ridge as the doctor's, though slightly lower than his. I was farther away from any neighbors. Very rarely did I feel lonesome. But when it happened, I saddled my pony and called on the doctor, just to see a human face and hear a human voice.

A tropical jungle is so rich with life that you simply cannot become desolate if you feel the whole universe in every little insect, in every lizard, in every chirp, in every rustle of leaves, in every shape and color of a flower. But, once in a while, I did have sort of a spell of fright and a sinking in my heart. It was something like being on a solo flight, surrounded by clouds, with the motor idling and with no instruments to guide you. Or like sitting alone in a small boat, far off the coast, with no bird in sight, on a quiet sea, and dusk falling.

The doctor was not much of a talker. Living in the tropical bush all by yourself makes you silent . . . although very rich in thought. There is never one second of the day or night when

the bush does not talk to you, whether with its never-dying voices, or by its permanent growing and decaying. Inevitably you reach the conclusion that life has but one meaning: "Enjoy it as long as it lasts and get the most out of it—for death is within you from the moment you are born."

The doctor and I would often sit in our rocking chairs for two or three hours without either of us saying a single word. Yet, somehow, we felt happy.

II

Now and then the doctor would say, "You know that little lake up there on the other side of the ridge, close to that patch of prairie? Well, there's a primitive palm hut near by. It's going to pieces now. I wonder who built it. I have all sorts of calculations about who might've set it up to live there all alone—maybe it was even somebody with a murder on his conscience. One afternoon I rode by there. I got off about thirty feet away and went the rest of the way on foot. I looked inside the opening that's supposed to be a door, and I saw—I saw—I—"

Here the doctor would slow his words until they faded into a mumble. A few seconds later, this mumble, too, would trickle

off—and yet I could clearly see that he was still telling his strange adventure, though he was telling it to himself alone.

I knew he thought I could hear his tale, and I refrained from telling him that I could not distinguish one word of what he was saying. One story, more or less, doesn't count, as long as it isn't a story you have lived yourself.

Again, on other occasions, he would start off, ". . . and . . . and . . . yes, as I was saying—there was the day when I happened to be in a very dense part of the bush. It was dark there in the thicket, but the bright sun was heavy upon the tops of the trees. You have to stop and wait in silence for half an hour or so before the bush will let you see or hear something of interest. I observed a tarantula cautiously crawling on the decaying trunk of an ebony tree.

"It was a dark-brown, very hairy beast the size of my hand. On the ground and close to that same tree, two huge black scorpions moved more cautiously still, both apparently not seeing the tarantula—any more than the tarantula was aware of the two scorpions. I thought it strange for scorpions to be walking about in the daytime. They rarely do. Now the tarantula and the two scorpions moved in the same

direction, the three having their eyes fixed on a—on a—a—"

At this point he fell into his customary mumble and soon his voice faded out.

Sometimes, when watching the doctor, I was under the impression that he was dead, that he had died many years ago and was kept alive for no other reason but that he had forgotten wholly that he was dead, since no one had noticed it and told him so. On such occasions I thought that if I could make a newspaper print a short note announcing his passing away, and if I showed him that note, he might actually fall dead at the same instant, and half an hour later wither away so rapidly that he would take on the appearance of a man buried fifty years ago.

I didn't have these ideas often—only when I saw him sitting in his chair, silently, without moving, gazing down upon the gray ocean of the jungle with eyes that hardly blinked and that seemed to be dead and empty.

Then again, on other days, I would find him very lively and active, given to easy talk of ordinary daily happenings at his place, even of such common affairs as the beating one of the men who worked for him had given his woman, with the result

that the woman couldn't see out of her blackened eyes.

Once, when he was in the mood for talking, I asked him if he'd ever written a book. It seemed to me that he had a way of telling things which would make him a great writer if he'd only take the pains.

"A book?" he said. "One book? One only? Fifteen, or—let me see—I think it must be eighteen. Yes . . . eighteen books. That's what I've written. Eighteen books."

"Published?"

"No. Never published. What for?"

"For people to read them."

"Nonsense. For people to read them? There are thousands of books—great books—which they have never read. Why should I give them more if they don't read the ones they already have?"

"You might've published the books to become famous, or to make a lot of money."

"Money? Money for books I write? Don't make me laugh. Besides, I've got enough money to lead the life I do. Why should I want more? What for? And as to fame—don't be silly, Gales. Fame! What is fame, after all? It stinks to hell and heaven, fame does. Today I am famous. Today my name is printed on the front page of all the papers in the world. Tomorrow, perhaps

fifty people can still spell my name correctly. Day after tomorrow I may starve to death and nobody cares. That's what you call fame. You shouldn't use such a word. Not you. Of course, there's another fame—the glorious one, the fame that reaches you after you're dead, and when nobody knows where your bones are bleaching. And what good does it do you to be famous after you've kicked off? It makes me sick even to speak about fame. It's the bunk."

"Okay, Doc. Let's can it. Forget it. Anyway, I think a good book—the kind I reckon you'd write—is always welcome to readers who appreciate good books."

"Provided the books reach the readers they're meant for. This happens now and then, maybe, but very rarely."

"Perhaps you're right, Doc. I've never given that problem any special thought. By all means, though, I'd like to read the books you wrote. Can I have them? At least one or two of them?"

"If I still had them, I guess I wouldn't want you to read them. But I don't have them. They've gone back to where they came from. Eternity, you know. I got full satisfaction out of my books in writing them. In fact, I think I got far more satisfac-

tion than any writer who has had his work published will ever get."

"Sorry, Doc," I said. "But I don't see the point."

"Not so difficult," he said. "It's like this. Once a book is published, the writer's satisfaction—if he is a true artist and not just a merchant—is marred by scores of things which have no connection with the pillars on which the universe rests. You see, I think of books as pillars of the universe. If a book is truly yours, it hurts your soul and heart to think of mailing it to a publisher. At least that's the way I felt, and still feel.

"Whenever I had finished a book, I read it, revised it, made changes which I thought essential to make it perfect—as nearly perfect as I could ever make it—and when this was done I felt happy and satisfied beyond measure. As soon as I had that satisfaction, I destroyed the book."

"You did what, Doc?" I said.
"You don't mean—"

"Yep, I meant it. That's exactly what I did. Sometimes I think that the trouble with people today is that we don't destroy enough of the things and systems which we believe perfect . . . and by destroying them make room for absolutely new and different things and systems infinitely more perfect than the ones we

destroyed. Have you ever destroyed something which you loved, or which you thought the finest and most perfect object under heaven? Have you?"

"No, Doc—at least not that I know of." I felt cold along my spine.

"If you haven't, try it some day. Try it once or more than once. If you're the right kind of man, one who can do it without remorse, you'll see for yourself how great a satisfaction you'll get out of it and how happy it will make you. You'll feel like you're newly born. Be like God, who destroys with his left hand what he created with his right."

"Who wants to be like God?" I said. "Not me."

"Depends. Frequently I think how different our art, our writings, our techniques, our architecture, our achievements would be if, let's say, at the year sixteen-hundred-fifty, everything which man had made so far would have been destroyed so thoroughly that no human would have been able to remember what a cart wheel had looked like, and whether the Venus de Milo had been a painting or a poem or a ship's keel, and whether democracies and monarchies had meant something to eat or church bells. As far as I'm concerned, I am convinced that the world would likely be a hundred times better

place to live in today if mankind had a chance now and then to discard all tradition and history and start fresh with no worn-out ideas and opinions to hamper the birth of an entirely new world."

III

One morning when I went to see the doctor, he said, "Very good, Gales. I'm glad you came in. I was just going to send for you. I have to go back to the States today. Got to attend to a certain affair which has been pending for quite some time. Of course, I might skip it altogether. I'm not much interested in the outcome, anyway. But there's a score of books, of very rare books, which I've been after for years. Seems that now, owing to a change in circumstances, I've got a good chance to get them at last. So, I can combine both matters on the same occasion. I'm positive I can be back inside of eight weeks. Still, I'm thinking about the place. It isn't that these Indians really steal—it's just that they think you've left everything to the jungle, or to them, or to whoever comes along and takes the trouble to pick it up. Well, how about it? Will you mind the place while I'm away?"

"All right by me, Doc," I said. "Guess I can put in eight weeks easily. What is time here, any-

way? It goes as fast as it comes. Sure, I'll stay here and keep tigers and lions off the porch."

"It's the dry season," he said, "so there isn't much you can do at your place, except cleaning out two or three acres. And that can wait without hurting you much. I'll tell Ambrosio to take two mules and go with you, and bring your things up here. Nobody will steal your roof."

He chuckled. His hands must have told him that the roof I had made was safe from marauders. Any Indian would be ashamed to have such a roof on his *jacal*.

"Of course," he went on, "I ought to tell you that you'll be all alone here while I'm away. The two families working for me are going to visit their relatives to celebrate a few weddings and a dozen baptizings, as I understand. They won't be back for ten weeks. There isn't any important work to do around here on account of the season. So I let them have their vacation now. They would go anyway, permission or no permission. You won't have much trouble with the animals. They look out for themselves. Let them have some maize three or four mornings every week. Examine them occasionally for open wounds to see that no worms are growing in them. You'll find

two gallons of creoline and some other things in that shed over there, if you need anything to cure them with."

"Don't worry, Doc," I said. "I'll feel just fine here. And I can do swell without any neighbors around here, anyhow. The animals will be okay. Don't I know what farm life is like? Don't you worry a bit. Leave everything to its own ways and leave all the rest to me."

When I returned with my tools, kettles, pans, blankets, mosquito bar, cot, and what I had on, the doctor was all set to leave.

"Make use of whatever you find in the house," he said. "Whenever you need something, just look in the boxes, cases, drawers and on the shelves. Help yourself to whatever you find. You'll have plenty of milk, and more eggs than you can eat."

He didn't have much baggage. Just two lean suitcases. He loaded them on a mule and then mounted his horse. Horse and mule were to be left with one of the American farmers by the depot.

"Well, *basta luego*," he called, and rode off.

IV

I sat on the porch for an hour or so, gazing down upon the

jungle sea, following in my mind the doctor's ride to the depot. Late in the afternoon I would see a thin smoke ribbon creeping over the surface of the jungle and close to the horizon, which would indicate the train in which the doctor was going home.

Home . . . ?

Aw, the hell with it. Forget it. Home is where I was, and nowhere else.

For the first time since I'd known the doctor, I went inside his house. We'd always had our coffee or tea on the porch, and I'd never gone beyond it.

He was well stocked with canned food. There were enough groceries to hold out for half a year if necessary. During the rainy season the nearest general store often could not be reached for a period of as long as two months. Neither man nor mule could pass the muddy and swampy stretches without sinking into them up to his knees, and sometimes even deeper.

The doc had told me to look around so that I'd know where to find things. I began with the table in the corner. I pulled out the drawer, hoping to find an old magazine. There weren't any. Just some bills and other papers in which I had no interest.

I stepped out on the porch again and pushed the rocking

chair close to the farthest corner. Then I sat down and looked over that greenish-gray sea of jungle. I could think of nothing. My mind came to rest. A wonderful feeling of tranquility took possession of my soul and body. I forgot earth, and heaven.

The eternal singing of the jungle, so soothing to the nerves once you have become used to it, lulled me into slumber, and I did not awaken until I heard the pitiful, harsh shriek of an animal caught by its enemy in the depths of the jungle.

V

It was during the next forenoon that I came upon the doctor's library.

The books were carefully kept in bookcases, which in turn were lined with tin sheets to protect them from tropical insects and from dampness and mildew during the rainy seasons. Apparently Doc had discovered the secret of how to keep books well preserved in the tropics. The books were in excellent condition.

The collection was a treasure. Most of the books were about ancient Indian civilizations which used to exist in Mexico, Central America, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. They treated of Indian history, traditions, reli-

gion, language, arts, craftsmanship and architecture. Many were on the so-called archaic culture of the early inhabitants of the Americas.

Some of the books were richly illustrated with ancient Indian hieroglyphs and with old Indian paintings. There were books and manuscripts dating as far back as the first half of the sixteenth century.

As far as I could judge, practically all the books were first editions. Only a few of them might have been other than firsts, and perhaps there had been no more than fifty copies printed of some of them. In early times, certain books of a scientific or historic nature were printed by order of book lovers who paid for the entire limited edition in advance.

Some of the manuscripts, documents, and parchments might easily have been the only ones still in existence. The value of that library could never be estimated in money alone.

As I learned later from other persons, the doctor had built up this unique library by hunting books and documents all over the republic—in monasteries, convents, old churches, in haciendas, and in out-of-the-way ranches. He had bought them from old families and from Indian peasants, from priests and from teachers

COSMOS SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY MAGAZINE

NO. 2 AND
35 CENTS

VISITOR FROM
NOWHERE

By

B. TRAVEN

Author of

TREASURE OF THE
SIERRA MADRE

ALL NEW STORIES
By Top Writers
B. TRAVEN • EVAN HUNTER
DR. ROBERT S. RICHARDSON
A. BERTRAM CHANDLER • N. R.
JACK VANCE • CARL JACOBI
AND OTHERS



B. Safran

in little country schools, and from soldiers and officers who had come into possession of books and manuscripts during the long revolution when convents, churches, and haciendas had been plundered.

He must have spent many, many years in collecting so many rare books. It seemed that when he'd obtained all the books he wanted or ever hoped to get, he'd buried himself in that jungle region to be alone with his treasure and enjoy it in a peaceful surrounding.

That he had left me alone with that priceless treasure without even mentioning it proved how much confidence he had in me.

I had not seen a single book in more than a year. I had hungered for them as a man living in a great city may hunger for green woods, blue lakes, murmuring creeks and cloudless days. And now I was standing before the very books I'd so much desired to read ever since that day I first heard of the great, mysterious civilization which existed and flourished to the south long before Columbus ever thought of sailing to what he believed to be a new world.

VI

I was soon completely under the spell of the histories and

mythologies. I forgot the present. I forgot to cook my meals. I felt no physical hunger. I milked the cows as if I were in a dream, and I drank the milk and swallowed the eggs right where I gathered them in order not to lose a single precious hour.

I read from sunrise until midnight, day in and day out. The lamp I had was just an ordinary kitchen lamp which didn't give much light. I did not mind. I put the lamp as close to the pages as possible.

It was so hot that the days seemed to be wrapped in flames, but I felt no discomfort. When at times I took notice of the tropics and heard the eternal singing of the bush, I considered all this not as something real but rather a part of the histories and narratives which I was reading. Everything that I read about had happened in the same country or nearby, under the same blazing sun, with the same insects and the same singing of the jungle.

Stories, time, tropical sun, the singing bush, the bites and stings of mosquitoes the constant whirring of multitudes of moths around the lamp, one occasional gaze over the dream-gray jungle ocean now and then—all that melted into a unit. Often I was not quite sure whether I had read a certain episode or descrip-

tion or seen it or dreamed it. I didn't know whether the fiery tropical sun was actually shining upon the corrugated iron roof of the bungalow or whether I was only reading about it in connection with a battle which the Aztecs fought against the Chimecs.

Sometimes it happened that I didn't realize when day had gone and night fallen. I had been reading by the light of the little lamp, yet I could not remember that I had lit the lamp. I could not recall when and how I had brought the lamp in, set it on the table before me, filled it up with kerosene and put a match to its wick. But there was the lamp right by my side and it had been there for a certain length of time.

I had done these things unconsciously while my mind was fully concentrated on the great events of the Tarascans, the Otomis, the Toltecs, the Totonacs, or whatever the people were about whom I was reading.

My only fear was that the doctor might return before I had finished with the books. Although he had left the treasure with me without saying one word about it, I felt positive that he would not let me have one book once he was home again. I knew he would be jealous and nervous and fear that he might lose a book if he lent it.

I was reading constantly, marvelling that such various cultures and great civilizations had existed in the Americas at a time when the Romans were still semi-savages and the Britons ate the brains of the bravest of their enemies slain in battle.

It all read like a fairy tale, but then again it was so very sober and logical. Somehow, every book read easily—like excellent fiction. Some of the books were in English, a few in French, and the majority in Spanish. The language used in any case was so vivid that the bungalow, the ranch, the patches of prairie, even the bush seemed to become populated with people I read about. Not for one single hour did I feel lonely. I was constantly under the impression that the people of the books were near me.

I began to look at the surrounding country, and at the natives, in a different way. So far I had seen them only as ordinary peasants. But now, when a peasant passed the ranch and asked for a drink of water, I searched his face for a likeness to the ancient kings and nobles whose pictures I saw in the old paintings and hieroglyphs.

But I was not satisfied with merely studying their faces; I studied their gestures, the manner in which they walked, the

particular characteristics of their voices when they spoke to me.

This material for practical study was scarce. For three, four, or even six days at a time, not one single wanderer would come this way. This was true because the main trail which communicated with the principal hamlets and settlements did not pass by the doctor's.

VII

One morning, after having slept badly, I decided to give myself a rest from so much reading lest I should lose my confection with the real world in which I had to live. I ate a hearty breakfast and took a stroll through the bush for exercise.

After walking for two hours along a trail which I could see had not been used for months, I suddenly realized that I was far in the depths of the bush where I had never been before, although I had thought I knew the region very well.

I stopped for a moment to get my bearings, wondering whether I ought to go on and learn where this new trail might eventually lead, when I was filled with a sense of the desolation of that dense jungle creeping around me like the horror of an ugly nightmare. What if I should be lost? What if I should have to

spend the night here in the depths of the jungle?

Looking around to see from which direction I had come and hoping to see a certain mark familiar to me, I saw a thin ribbon of smoke curling above the trees hardly a quarter of a mile away. There had been no thunder storms for months, so the smoke I saw could not have been the result of lightning.

I got to work with the machete I carried and began cutting my way through to the point where I had seen the smoke. Finally I came upon an open space in the jungle.

An Indian coal-burner was squatting before his primitive kiln, a mound of chopped mahogany covered with earth. The Indian watched the play of smoke around the kiln as if he were meditating on where the smoke might go.

No move or gesture indicated that he had heard my approach. Still, I knew he must have heard my cutting through the under-brush. Somehow I was sure that he was perfectly conscious of somebody near him. Had he believed me to be an animal of the wilds, he would have taken an attitude of alertness.

I was still hidden from him by the dense foliage, but now I stepped out of hiding and went straight up to him.

He showed no surprise.

"*Buenas tardes, señor,*" I greeted.

"Good afternoon to you, señor. Welcome. Be seated. Visitors are rare around here."

I offered him tobacco and corn leaves and we rolled our cigarettes. He had a strange way of rolling his, I noted, a way I'd never seen before anywhere. But I suppose there are a hundred and one ways a cigarette may be rolled.

His brown skin had a certain yellowish-copper tint which made it look like bronze mixed with gold. He was slim but wiry. The features of his face were fine-drawn, and they had a noble symmetry which indicated that he must be of high intelligence even though he might be ignorant of reading and writing.

There were two things about him which I thought strange.

One was that he had a beard. Beards among Indians are not frequent. The purer the blood, the rarer the beard. A white man, of course, would hardly call such thin silky hairs a beard. For an Indian, however, this flimsy chin web of his would entitle him to be named "The Bearded One." This beard, insignificant as it was, gave not only his face but his whole person a certain dignity which most other Indians of that region lacked. It was a

dignity by which he would stand out in a crowd of natives.

The second strange thing I noticed was his hands. Indians in general, both men and women, have smaller and finer hands and feet than the white man has. But in spite of the hard work this man had to do as a charcoal-burner, he had hands so conspicuously fine and nobly shaped that I could not remember ever having seen hands like them before. At least not belonging to a real person. In old paintings, perhaps, one might find such hands. No great artist would paint or model such hands, because he would deny that any human being could have hands of this kind and still be human.

These hands irritated me. They made me feel inferior to him, I could not believe it possible that a man, any man, might work as hard as did this charcoal-burner and still have hands like his.

"Yes, señor, you are right," he said in the course of our talk. "Yes, it is true that my ancestors have been princes of the people living in this region of land. On the same plain where today there is jungle, there used to be more than one hundred and twenty cities, towns and villages. There were sacred cities as well, temples and pyramids by the score, all of them covered now with .

earth—with a pitiful earth to protect them from profanity. Cities and towns destroyed; their inhabitants, once so happy, murdered by the Spaniards when they conquered our lands. Our people wanted peace. A contract was celebrated with the conquistadores. But these men, with no true god to guide their hearts, broke the treaty and our people took to arms to throw off the yoke with its tortures, terrors and slavery. The first army sent against us was defeated by our men.

"Then the captain-general came with his special troops, and with him he brought twenty thousand hired Indian auxiliaries, traitors to their own blood. And he brought with him animals to ride on and cannons by which to spit fire on our warriors. Men, women, children were slaughtered without mercy. Our cities, villages and temples were burned to ashes.

"Within six days, five hundred princes, nobles and chiefs were hanged by the Spaniards. These were the princes captured while three times as many perished in battle. Had it not been for faithful servants to take the children of six or seven of our kings and hide them in the mountains until the region was quiet again, I most likely would not be here. I would never have

been born a member of a princely family."

As he was telling his story he did not look at me but kept watching the curling smoke ribbons on their way up in the air.

Then he slowly turned his head and looked searchingly into my eyes.

I had not observed his eyes before. But now, forced to look at them at close range, I noted that he had deep brown eyes of a warm, velvet tone. They were slightly dreamy, their lids covering about one-third of the iris. It might have been the back glare of the bright sun upon the sandy ground—but whatever the reason, he had in his eyes a very distinctive glittering fog. I had the curious feeling that no mortal man could possess such eyes. With such eyes a man might enslave the whole world should he decide on it.

"You know the history of your people astonishingly well, señor," I said. "Did you read it somewhere or learn it at a school?"

"No, señor, I never read it. It was told to me by my father and my uncle, and it had been told to them by *their* fathers, and so on back to the times when it happened."

"Felling those iron-like trees and chopping them up and then

making charcoal must be hard work," I said.

"It surely is hard work, señor," he said. "Nonetheless, I like it. What is more, it is honest work, work we have done for thousands of years—ever since our god gave us fire. I can work alone, all by myself, without a master ordering me . . . a thing I would not like. Here I can sit and think for days and months and years while watching those little snakes of smoke playing about like faraway music that comes and goes and comes again. Do you notice, señor, that each snake curling out of its little hole has its very own way of creeping out, playing about and disappearing in the air? Each has its own life, its own story to tell, just like a man. But each has its own personality, while many a man has none at all. Don't you think so, too, señor?"

"You are right," I said. "And I certainly believe that the work you do—while it may be hard—is honorable work."

"It makes me very happy, señor, to hear you say that. You asked me about your way back home, didn't you?"

The fact was that I had not asked him, though I had been thinking about it all the time I had been sitting on the ground beside him.

"You are well out of your

way, señor," he said. "But you'll be all right in a minute. See that green shrub? Turn to your right there and count two hundred well-measured paces. You will then come upon a path, which you follow to your left. Good luck and many thanks for coming here and paying me such a delightful visit. *Mil gracias, señor, adiós.*"

I followed the way he had showed me, and I came upon the trail he had mentioned. When I was sure of my way once more, I stopped and turned around to see whether I might remember that trail if I ever returned.

I could not make out the place where I had talked to the Indian. The more I looked around the more I became confused about even the direction from which I had come.

VIII

I arrived at the bungalow late in the afternoon. As soon as I finished dinner, I again buried myself in the books, more eager than ever to finish them before the doctor returned. I read as if I were in a fever. I always dropped on my cot at midnight as though all my limbs were filled with lead. Morning would not find me refreshed.

My sleep was no longer sound. My temples often hammered and

the veins of my arms and legs seemed to swell larger every day. My head frequently got so hot at night that I thought it might burst.

All this, however, was only physical. Mentally, I felt happy and good. No longer did I live in the present; it seemed that I was living in the remote times of the books. Emotionally, I lived the lives of the people I was reading about. As I had no opportunity to speak to living people, save on those rare occasions when a peasant passed by, I spoke to the people living in the books.

Gradually it came to me that I thought I could speak as those people did—that I could think their thoughts, and that I had their ideas and their outlooks on life.

The feeling that I believed myself living in the past was particularly strong at night while reading by the weak light of that little kitchen lamp with all the doors open and with the eternal singing of the bush in my ears.

IX

One night, while reading a book on the civilization and history of the people of Texcoco, I happened to raise my eyes from the pages. It was not entirely of my own will that I had done so,

I realized; it was more as if I had somehow been forced to. I had the curious impression that somebody else was with me in the room, that someone had been watching me for a length of time.

How this amazing sensation had come to me became clear almost immediately.

My active mind had been fully occupied with the book, whereas my subconscious mind, during the time I was reading, had carefully marked everything that was going on in the room. It was as if my subconscious mind had been trying to protect me against some sort of danger.

During my travels in the tropical jungles, this new sense had slowly developed within me like a special instinct. Often that new sense had wakened me in my shack or in a tent—and when this happened I usually found something wrong inside or near the place. Once it was a rattler only five feet away; another time it was a tiger lured to the shack by the meat I had hung up to dry; once I found the tent just beginning to catch fire because an unexpected breeze had stirred up some nearly-dead embers and thrown them on the canvas.

Now, while still reading, my subconscious mind had called upon me to be on my guard because something was not as it

should be. Strange as it may appear, I very positively felt that no actual danger was threatening me. I felt calm and safe, though slightly irritated. This irritation had grown steadily stronger until I could no longer resist it. I had to look up to see what caused that annoyance.

I turned my head.

And there, in the middle of the room, stood an Indian. He gave me the impression that he had been standing there and watching me for some time. It might well have been ten minutes or so. And strange to say, at the very moment I looked at him I could tell exactly the page and line I had been reading when he entered.

He looked straight at my face.

With refined tact and patience he waited until I would speak to him. Quite obviously he had stepped up to the porch without making any noise. Seeing me busy with my book and paying no attention to him, he had finally entered, apparently hoping that I would notice him at once.

It is the custom of the land that before entering a house one asks, "With your permission." I was sure he had said so, and that I had, while reading, mumbled something which he had interpreted as, "Please come in."

Be that as it may, there he stood, motionless as a statue.

He obviously regarded my looking at him as questioning what he had come for, because at that instant he bent a knee, touched the floor with the palm of his right hand, lifted his hand up to his head with the palm toward me and rose at the same time, holding that gesture.

It was an odd sort of greeting; I couldn't remember ever seeing an Indian salute that way before.

"Good evening," I said to him in Spanish.

"Night is long and cold," he began without actually answering my greeting in the manner I had expected. "Hogs do bother me. Oh, it is horrible, ever so horrible to be on defense and have nothing to defend with. Built up with sacred care so as to be sure and safe for eternity. Yet now decaying and breaking into pieces. Long is the night, oh, señor, long, dark, and cold. Above all and everything, though, it is the hogs. Hogs are the incarnation of all that means horror in this world and in the one beyond. Nothing on earth or anywhere else is more dreadful than hogs."

He raised one arm and pointed in a certain direction. Somehow his gesture did not agree with what he had just said. At least that was what I thought.

What was I supposed to answer?

I had not the vaguest idea of

what he was talking about. It seemed confused. He was not drunk. His eyes were steady and there was no indication that he might be out of his mind or under the influence of a drug.

Not knowing what to answer, I bent over my book, stalling for time. I caught up with the line I had been reading when I had lifted my eyes—and then a terrible thought flashed through my mind. What if the strain of constant loneliness and the continuous reading about strange people and bygone days were driving me insane? Of course there was the possibility that it was merely a fever or some other tropical sickness. I knew that certain fevers start by one's seeing things and hearing voices which are not real.

I found it difficult to define clearly where reality ended and imagination began.

Just to say something, and hear my own voice sounding in the room, I asked, "Excuse me, señor, but what do you mean? I've no idea what you're talking about. I'll listen to your story, but please tell it plain—just one thing after another."

I looked up again. But he was gone. He had left as silently as he had entered.

I stepped to the door. I wanted to make sure that I had in fact seen someone—or had had an hallucination. If it turned out

to be a delusion, then I knew I'd better stop reading those heavy books.

Thank heaven, I was sane and my mind was still in good shape. There he was, moving like a shadow, but clearly cut out against the lower part of the sky.

He was not very tall. From a distance, he appeared to be a slender youngster of seventeen, and even his walk showed the pure blood of his noble race. He moved with the beautiful grace of a deer going to the brook for its evening drink.

X

I returned to the table to resume my reading, but I found it difficult to concentrate. The visitor stayed in my mind.

Strange....

I couldn't recall with any accuracy the words and phrases he had used, but I knew for certain that he had not spoken Castellano or any other language familiar to me. And still I had clearly understood every word he said, even though some of the connections had failed to make sense.

I reviewed the episode in my mind. There had been his singular greeting. He had greeted me in the way which had been customary with some of the ancient peoples about whom I had been

reading. Of course I realized immediately that this was sheer nonsense. I had begun to confuse the things I had read with the things I imagined having seen. Something was happening to my mind; otherwise such confusion would not be possible.

The fact that my visitor had been in rags meant nothing at all. Practically all Indian peasants wore nothing better.

And then I remembered that he had worn neither pants nor shirt—at least of a kind which we would give those names. He had been bedecked with ragged fabrics which had the appearance of costly garments, except that they looked as though they were heavily deteriorated by time and weather. They were so threadbare that one might expect to see them fall apart any minute. The texture of the garb seemed fantastic, like the kind one may see in a museum in the department of ancient clothes.

Perhaps I was altogether wrong about his clothes, but I was quite positive about something else. His upper arms as well as his ankles were adorned with armlets and anklets of heavy gold, beautifully worked. And he wore a necklace which only a highly skilled goldsmith could have made.

Again, on trying to recall more details, I discovered that I had,

in fact, seen nothing of what I believed I had seen. I had equipped the man with clothes and jewelry about which I had read during the last few days and which I had seen in the illustrations found in the books.

The whole episode was ridiculous.

With that thought in mind, I closed my book and went to bed.

XI

While standing on the porch next morning, I noted three hogs roaming about the place. Two of them were black and one was yellow. It occurred to me that I had seen these same three hogs before, without taking any special interest in them.

But this time I actually stared at them—for all of a sudden they reminded me of my visitor of last night.

Hadn't he said something about hogs and how horrible they were? Somehow I couldn't see any connection between my visitor and those hogs. Not at that moment, at least.

The hogs must be the property of an Indian family living somewhere in the bush. Perhaps they were straying for the food which the jungle offered them in abundance. As a rule, Indian peasants let their hogs go free to look out for themselves. Only during the

last few weeks before they are sold or butchered are hogs tied to a tree and given plenty of corn.

If those hogs were the property of the man who had visited me last night, and if he didn't want them running away from his place—well, it was his business, not mine. I thought it rather peculiar that he should bother me so late at night for such a trifle.

Still, I might do a little for him. I threw stones at the animals to chase them off. It helped. After trotting a hundred yards or so, they turned to their right and went into the bush, making for a mound covered with weeds and underbrush.

It looked as if they had found food near the mound, because I saw them moving about, digging their snouts here and there in the shrubs, apparently plowing the ground for sweet roots.

I gathered the eggs in the chicken coop and cooked my breakfast. I forgot all about the hogs.

XII

Three days later, about eleven o'clock at night, I was once again absorbed by my books. And once again I had the same strange sensation which had overcome me the night the Indian visitor

had entered the bungalow, unseen and unheard.

Casting a look sidewise, away from the book, I felt an ice-cold shiver running up and down my spine when I saw the same Indian. He was watching me silently.

The shiver I had felt left me at once. It angered me to see him there again without having asked for permission to come in.

I yelled at him. "Just what do you mean by sneaking in here in the middle of the night? This is no saloon and no *cantina* either. This is a private home, strictly private. And I want you to respect that privacy. What the devil do you want, anyway? If you're looking for your hogs, get them away from this place and tie them up. I don't like hogs around here. In fact, I hate them. Do you understand? I despise hogs."

He looked at me, and his eyes had a pronounced emptiness, as though he had to interpret carefully what I had said to him. Then, in a heavy voice, he said, "So do I, sir. So do I, believe me, I, too, despise hogs. More, I am afraid of hogs. Hogs are the terror of the universe."

"That's none of my business," I said. "If you don't like them, butcher them and have done with them. Or sell them. What do I care? Only, for heaven's sake, leave me in peace."

I looked straight at his face. His eyes were so very sad that all my violent outburst subsided into nothing. I began to feel immense compassion for him. He seemed to be suffering.

He kept his eyes fixed on mine for long minutes. Then he said, "Look here, señor. Please look at that." He pointed at calf of his left leg.

About six inches above the ankle there was a repulsive wound.

"This," he explained, "has been done by the hogs."

There was a twang in his voice that nearly made me break into tears. My overtired brain was beginning to tell on me. This singular desire to weep, surely, was a warning of nature that I'd better be more careful about my unceasing occupation with the books. I would not go that soft unless there was something wrong with my nerves.

He continued. "Oh, sir, it is ever so horrible. How can I make you understand? To know that I am so utterly helpless and without any means for defense against the gruesome attacks of those ugly beasts. Pray, señor, pray to all the powers of providence that never in all eternity may befall you so great a misfortune as the one I am suffering. It will not be long now before those loathsome monsters will

gnaw at my heart. They will suck my eyes out of my head. And then there will come the day of all days of horror when they are come to eat my brain. Oh, sir, by all that is sacred to you, please do something for me. Help me in my pains so bitter that I have no power in my words to describe them to you. I suffer a thousand times more than any human can bear. What else, pray, can I say so that you may be convinced of how horribly I suffer?"

At last I knew what he had come for. He believed me to be the doctor. It was known in the whole region that the doctor did not practice medicine any longer, but as the next nearest doctor lived some seventy miles away, Doctor Cranwell helped out in urgent cases for the sake of kindness. For such emergency cases he kept a well-equipped medicine chest on hand.

I took out bandages, cotton, a disinfectant, and an ointment. When I approached the man to apply the disinfectant, he stepped back one pace and said, "This, señor, is useless. Quite useless in my case, I assure you. It is the hogs which make me suffer. I do not mind the wound. The wound is only a warning for me of what is going to happen in the future if I cannot be helped against the hogs."

I ignored his refusal to be

treated, and grasped him firmly by the leg.

Yet I grasped empty space.

Looking up, I saw that he had stepped back another pace. How ridiculous, I thought, to be deceived that easily. I could have sworn that my grasping hand had been exactly at the very place where his leg had been at the very moment I reached out for it.

I rose and did nothing about the wound.

I put the medicants on the table, and stood there a moment, wondering what else I might do. Then, as if by some impulse, I turned around and looked him over.

"Those are beautiful ornaments you're wearing," I said, pointing to his bracelets, his anklets and his rich necklace. "They're wonderful. Where did you get them?"

"My nephew gave them to me when I had to leave him and all the others."

"They seem to be very old. They look like Aztec or Toltec craftsmanship of ancient times."

He nodded slightly. "They are very old, indeed. They were part of the house treasure of my royal family."

I smiled indulgently.

He was too polite, though, to take notice of my grin.

However, in this silence, I realized that I was again confusing

the present with the past of which I had been reading so much lately.

Strange, I thought to myself. Hadn't he said, "My nephew gave them to me?" Why, this was the custom with the ancient Aztecs, as it was with the Chichimecs and many other ancient Indian peoples. After the death of the king, not the son but the nephew of the king became the ruler of the people, a continuance which proved the Indians of old had a great knowledge of the natural laws of heredity of which we know so little. Even their calendar had more sense than ours has today. This man had a right to be proud of his ancestry.

"With your kind permission, I must go now," he said. "Only, sir, please do not forget my plight. It is the hogs that make my pains so horrible. Perhaps two or three big stones well fixed and cemented might do. I feel profoundly ashamed of myself because I have to beg for help, señor. But you see, I am unable to defend myself. I am so utterly helpless and powerless. I am very much in need of a friend alive. Oh, but that I could make you understand."

Tears were slowly rolling down his cheeks although he had obviously tried hard to keep them back.

As if in a solemn ceremony,

he now raised his right arm, touched his lips with his open hand, and brought his hand slightly above his head. For a few seconds he kept the palm of his raised hand turned toward me.

I noted that his hand was of a very noble shape, and in the same instant I thought that I had seen such a hand somewhere before, and not so very long ago, either. However, I could not clearly remember where and when it had been. It must have been in a dream, I decided. And now I noted that he had a beard, which was like a silken web. Never before had I seen such a thin, silky beard—at least not that I could recall at the moment. Yet that beard reminded me of stories of fights which Indians seemed to have been forced into by their oppressors a long time back. A mental picture appeared before me of hundreds of Indians hanging lifeless from trees and of Indian children running madly toward the huge mountains.

I tortured my memory, but I could not place precisely where I had heard or read such things. If only I could remember whether I had read about them in one of the books, and in which book, I would feel relieved.

I decided to ask him where he was living, a question which

seemed to me, at this moment, the most important problem in the world.

I looked up.

To my surprise, I saw that he had left while I had been dreaming with my eyes open.

I leaped to the door.

He strides like a king, I thought, as I watched him walking along the path.

He must have sensed that I was watching him, because, after he had gone about a hundred yards, he stopped, turned around, and with his outstretched arm pointed toward that mound to which the hogs had waddled after I stoned them away from the house. Then he continued on his way.

After another few paces, he left the path, hesitated a moment, then moved along in the direction of the mound. He ascended the mound slowly, as if his feet had become very heavy. Then he was swallowed by the high brushwood, and I could see him no longer.

XIII

Right after sunrise next morning I took a machete and cut my way through to that mound. I carefully investigated the ground and the shrubs near it to find the trail by which the Indian had left the night before. My aston-

ishment was great when I saw that there was no trace of any trail whatever. Not even a branch or twig was broken to show where he had gone after having passed the mound.

It was by no means as easy to follow him on his way as I had thought it would be. I wanted to find him because I wished to trade for some of his ornaments. I could offer, in exchange, things which might be of real use to him, such as leather for new huaraches, a pair of new pants, a shirt, or whatever he might prefer, money not excluded.

I looked more closely at the mound, and I made a curious discovery.

The mound was not, as I had imagined, a natural little hill or rock. It was, instead, a man-made mound, built of hewn stones perfectly joined together with some sort of mortar as hard as the best cement. Thorny shrubs and brushes had taken root in crevices and cracks, covering the little monument, or whatever it represented, so densely that it could not be told from a natural elevation of the ground.

This strange find made me forget about following the Indian on his trail of last night.

After I cut down the weeds and shrubs, I made another dis-

covery. Stone steps led up to the top of the mound, from west to east.

The height of the mound was twelve feet, more or less. Thirteen steps led to the top. This was of high interest to me, for with the Indians of old, thirteen meant a definite cycle of years. Four of these cycles, or fifty-two years, had the same significance to them as has a century to us, and served as the means by which they recorded their history.

After all the shrubs and weeds had been cleared away, the mound stood out like a sort of pyramid with a flat top, each side of which was about six feet long. Close to its base, one side of the mound had been broken in. From the appearance of mortar and pieces of stone strewn over weeds which were still green, I judged that this breaking-in must have occurred only a few days ago. I was positive that the hogs must have caused it the other day when I stoned them away and they had crossed over to the site.

On looking closer, I found that the hogs had managed to work through the construction so as to reach the interior of that little pyramid—a job which would not be difficult to accomplish, considering that the masonry at this part of the mound had begun to decay.

I had the idea that, right here, at least part of the solution to the two night visits I had been honored with lately might be found.

I hurried back to the house to get a pick-ax and a spade.

I broke off stone after stone, lump after lump of hard mortar, from the side of the pyramid which, because of its state of deterioration, was easiest to work on.

The job was tough. The concrete proved far more resistant than I had thought it might be. Whoever had built the little monument had certainly known how to do a good, lasting job.

After more than two hours' work, I had opened a hole just large enough so that I could squeeze myself through it.

Once inside, I struck a match. I had no sooner lighted it than I dropped it. I was out of that cave so quickly that my bare arms and shoulders, and my ears and neck, were all but covered with bleeding scratches caused by the glass-like edges of the broken mortar and rocks.

I sat on the ground, breathing heavily.

Sitting there under the clear sun, I tried to catch my breath and thought of how little a man can trust his eyes. I was certain that my eyes had played a trick on me.

My first intention was to leave the mound exactly as I had found it, save that I would close the hole I had broken in. Yet now, after having been inside and seen its ghastly contents, I had no choice. No longer could I afford to leave everything inside as I had seen it. It would haunt me for the next twenty years. It might disturb the quiet of my mind forever. Most surely it would keep me awake for hundreds of nights and bring me to the verge of insanity. I would now be afraid to go into a dark room or sleep with all the lights out.

There was nothing else left for me to do but clear up the whole thing—if only to make absolutely certain whether I was already mad, or only on the road to madness, with a faint chance of being cured in time.

I decided to get at it immediately, lest I spend a terrible night.

XIV

Mindless of the blazing sun thundering down upon me, I started breaking through the thick concrete layer of the top which separated me from the interior. I had to have light—light, and still more light.

It was almost noon when I had laid the top open and the inside of the little edifice was fully

exposed to the bright sunlight.

I was neither out of my mind nor dreaming. The painful bruises on my hands told me better than anything else that I was wholly awake.

In the now wide open pit, built so strong and fine as if meant to keep its contents safe until the last day of the world, squatted that same man who had visited me at night on two occasions.

His elbows rested upon his knees. His head was bent down and his face was partly hidden in the palms of his hands. He sat as if in deep meditation or as if asleep.

He had been buried with utmost care, and in a way which told better than a tombstone in what high esteem he must have been kept by his people, and how much he must have been loved by his friends and kin.

Next to him there had been a few vessels made of clay which originally might have contained some food and drink to be used by him on his journey to the beyond. Unfortunately, these very fragile and richly painted dishes had been smashed by a lump of mortar which I could not prevent from dropping down when it came loose.

I knew that the tomb had been absolutely airtight until quite recently, when the hogs had suc-

ceeded in breaking through the masonry. They could not have done so had not vigorous tropical shrubs and parasitic vines, for long centuries, driven their roots deeper and deeper into the concrete, finally cracking it partly open, and thereby starting its decay. Once that decay had occurred, it was easy for the hogs to widen the cracks and push their snouts through. After a certain length of time—probably only three days ago—they had found it possible to crawl inside.

The appearance of the body was not that of an Egyptian mummy. It was not bandaged. The body looked exactly as though the man had died only day before yesterday, if not last night when I had seen him go to this mound.

The rags in which the body was clothed looked far more costly in the bright light of the sun than they had at night. The fabric was of the finest texture, a sort of silk-like goods such as the ancient Aztecs and Toltecs are known to have manufactured from the fibers of specially cultivated maguey and henequin plants. That texture was interwoven with strong threads of cotton to give the whole a very durable appearance. The colors had faded, but it could be clearly seen that at least six or seven different dyes had been used.

I saw that the calf of his left leg had been gnawed deeply at exactly the same spot which he had shown me last night. However, there was no blood, either fresh or dry, although the hogs had reached the bone.

It seemed strange that the hogs should have chewed off his calf, because I observed that the flesh of his breast, face, arms, legs, and yes, that of the whole body, was thoroughly hardened. I touched it. It felt like wood. In my opinion, the body could have no food value whatever. But then hogs, perhaps, think differently.

It was easy to explain how the body had kept its life-like appearance for such a long time. In the first place, it must have been embalmed. This was a custom with the ancient civilized Indians, and it was applied mainly to priests, kings and nobles. The means used for their embalmings were probably superior to those in vogue in ancient Egypt because, in this case, they had proved more effective. In the second place, the tomb in which the body had been buried was thoroughly air-tight, a fact which also helped to preserve the body in such excellent condition. And, perhaps, the soil which covered and surrounded the whole structure possessed certain chemicals which aided a

great deal in protecting structure and body from disintegration.

The body was so strikingly life-like that I almost expected at any moment to see it move, raise its head from its hands, stand up, and talk to me.

XV

The sun was right above my head, and its heat became more and more unbearable. It occurred to me that leaving the body exposed too long to the scorching sun would have a bad effect on it.

I ran to the house and returned with a wooden case, into which I meant to set the body and carry it to a shady place, either on the porch or right in the house.

Why I was so eager to get the body away from its pit instead of leaving it where I had found it and where it belonged, I did not know. Here the man had rested for so many hundred years, and here he ought to remain.

But I was not guided by any definite thought or idea at all—at least not by one that was my own, born in my mind. I acted in a purely mechanical way without giving the *why* a single thought. I acted as though there was no other way of doing what I did. Yet, at the same time, I knew

perfectly well that I was under no suggestion from the outside.

With utmost care, I went about the job of putting the body into the wooden case I had brought. There was not room enough inside the pit to set the case right beside the body, so I left the case outside near the base of the structure.

I crept down into the cave with the intention of lifting the body up and getting it out of the cave. I grasped the body firmly, but I could not get a hold on it because my hands clapped together without anything between them save air.

Between my grasping hands the body had collapsed entirely and nothing was left but a thin layer of dust and ashes which, if carefully gathered, would not have amounted to more than what a child might hold in his two hands.

Hardly ten minutes had passed since I had positively convinced myself that the body was as hard as dry wood. All was gone now. The thick black hair, the dyed fingernails, the costly rags he had worn, had all changed to dust—a grayish powder, so fine that the slightest breeze would carry it away.

Still wondering how all this could have happened, and in so short a time, I noticed that the body dust had already mixed

with the earth to which it had fallen—so much so that I could no longer tell exactly which was the dust and which was the soil.

There was no use in standing there any longer on the excavation, with the broiling sun above my head and the steaming bush all around me, while I waited for something to happen.

Of course I was dreaming. Yes, that was it. And the tropical sun made things worse. I tried hard to wake up and shake off the drowsiness accumulating in my head.

I was near a grave sickness. The bush was like a huge monster whose fangs I could not escape. Where should I go for help? Wherever I might run there was only jungle and bush and that merciless sun above me, making me feel as though my brain was slowly drying up to a spoonful of dust.

XV

What was I to do with myself? I was sick, terribly sick. I had lost the faculty of distinguishing between what was real and what was imagination.

And then, right at my feet, glittering lustily in the bright sun, I saw the golden ornaments of my Indian. Those wonderful trinkets, which I had admired only last night, had not turned to

dust. There they were in full sight. Since they were lying right at the bottom of the pit, in the dust, and since I could feel them distinctly with my fingers, take them into my hands, lift them out of the dust, they must be real—and no doubt as to that.

If the jewels were still here, then the Indian or his dead body must have been here, too. So I had sufficient, satisfying proof that I was as sane as I had always been. I wasn't sick. There couldn't be any such things resting in my hands if all that which I had experienced had been only a dream.

I took them into the bungalow, sat down and examined them minutely with all the knowledge I had acquired from the books. What great artists were those men who had been able to create such beautiful ornaments—and with tools which we would consider very primitive.

I wrapped them in paper, made a little package of them and put that package into an empty can which I placed on top of a bookshelf.

Before sunset I returned to the mound and filled up the pit with stones and earth. I wanted to prevent stray horses or cows from breaking their legs. Even a wandering peasant might come this way by night, fall into the cave and do himself harm.

After I had filled up the pit, I realized that it would not have been necessary. Neither man nor animal would be likely to take his way across the mound instead of simply going around it. Yet, somehow, a certain call in my mind had urged me to close the cave the way I had done. And I felt that it was only to have an excuse for that extra and practically useless job that I had thought to protect people or animals from being harmed.

I spent the whole evening and half the night recalling to mind all the details of what I had experienced during the last few days. But when I tried to bring all these different happenings into a logical connection, I discovered so many contradictions, so many non-fittings, that I had to give up without having reached a single conclusion.

I turned in at midnight.

XVII

My sleep was anything but quiet.

One wild dream was chased by another wilder still. But each dream had its climax and none broke before it reached that climax. As soon as a dream reached that point, I awoke—and then fell asleep again instantly when I realized that it had been only a dream.

I dreamed that I was strolling about the market places of ancient cities. It seemed impossible for me to find what I was so badly in need of. Whenever I thought I had found what I wanted, I discovered at the same moment that I had forgotten what it was.

So as not to appear ridiculous or draw suspicion upon myself, I bought just anything at a certain stand.

No sooner did I have it in my hands than I knew it was something different from the thing I had bought. I put the bought object into my pocket, but found to my dismay that there was no pocket in any of my clothes. The clothes themselves were ragged, yet of very fine fabric.

Now the merchant asked me to pay, but I could not find the cocoa beans, which served as money.

Instead of the cocoa beans, I found my hand full of pepper corns, ants, painted fingernails, dust, and bits of black, wiry Indian hair.

Naked Indian policemen chased me for being a market cheat. I dashed off into the jungle, where I was entangled by thorny brushes, by weeds and vines, and by fantastic cactus plants which cried and shouted and tried to hold me and deliver

me into the hands of the naked policemen.

My skin was torn almost to shreds by thorns and stings of all kinds. Wherever I set my foot down, there were gigantic scorpions, ugly tarantulas, hairy little monkeys. The monkeys had greenish eyes, and they tried to lure me into their caves. But the caves were too small and I could not squeeze myself through.

From the branches and around the trunks of trees, hundreds of snakes were curling—tiny ones, green and black and purple ones. Some were lashing out like whips. And there were snakes which were half lizards, and others which looked like a human leg with a chunk gnawed off at the calf.

While I was fighting off the snakes, tarantulas, and scorpions, I heard the policemen yelling after me. They were now setting police tigers on my trail to hunt me down more quickly.

There was no way of escape other than over a steep rock. I began to climb.

When I reached the top, I found a pack of mountain lions waiting for me on a platform, made of cement, six feet square. Huge birds were circling above my head, waiting to catch me and feed my carcass to their young. Just as one of those gigantic birds dashed straight down upon me

and was so close I could distinctly feel the rush of air from its wings, I began to fall down into a deep ravine.

The fall lasted many hours.

While I was falling, I noticed many things, all of which were happening at the same time.

The Indian policemen were now clad in parrot feathers. They whistled at the police possums, which they used instead of police tigers, the tigers having mutinied because they had not been paid their wages in advance.

The whole police force marched home, led by a brass band. They went right back to the marketplace, arrested the merchant to whom I still owed three cocoa beans and a half, and sold him to his neighbor, into slavery. He did not mind because he shouted all over the place that it was just the very thing he liked best to be. He would no longer have to worry about the house rent and the taxes and the light bills going up and the ever growing demands of his greedy family. He said he knew very well that the Aztecs always treated their slaves as well as if they were members of the same family and all nephews.

Meanwhile, I had reached the bottom of a canyon. I bumped my head hard against a stone, so hard that I woke up and found the canyon flooded with

light. It was the moon which lighted my room.

Realizing that I was safe on my cot, and that there were no naked policemen after me, I immediately calmed down and at once fell asleep again.

XVIII

This time I found myself fighting on the side of the conquistadores.

The Aztecs took me prisoner. I was carried to their main temple to be sacrificed to their war god. The priests threw me upon a great, well-polished stone. The high priest approached me, asking what I wanted to have for dinner. He said that he was going to tear my heart out while I was still alive and throw it at the feet of the war god. The war god himself was looking at me in a horrible way.

The war god grinned at me and winked with his glittering eyes. Although I knew perfectly well that he was only a stone god, I nevertheless saw him grin constantly and blink one eye, and I heard him say that he was highly pleased to have my throbbing heart thrown at his lips so that he could suck it with gusto, because he was tired of Indian hearts and would like a change in his diet once in awhile.

The high priest came closer

to me. He tucked up the wide sleeves of his white robe, grasped me brutally by my chin, bent my head down in a cruel manner as if he had to slaughter an ox, and then thrust his knife of obsidian into my chest.

Suddenly I awoke from the imaginary pain in my chest, and fell asleep again right away.

I saw myself fighting on the side of the Tabasco Indians. They called Malinche a traitor and they fought to throw off the hard yoke of cannons and horses.

The Spaniards caught me and, nearly mad with joy, danced around me, yelling that they were glad to get another American for breakfast.

I was court-martialed and sentenced to the loss of both my hands. The hands were chopped off with a pocket-knife which, as a special favor to me, they had made extremely dull.

After my hands were off, my arms felt very numb and I woke up because my arms were hanging sideways out over the edge of my cot, thus making the circulation of blood difficult.

XIX

Being a licensed owner of a sweat shop in the ancient city of Tenochtitlan, I had received an order to make the coronation mantle for the new king who was

to be crowned, and would then put the syllable 'zin' at the end of his name.

The mantle was to be made from the beautiful feathers of tropical birds. Yet all the feathers came alive and flew off. I had to chase each single feather and get it back while only a quarter of an hour remained before the coronation was to begin.

The princes, chieftains, nobles and ambassadors were already assembled. A huge crowd hummed in front of the king's palace and on the streets leading to the great pyramid.

Hundreds of royal servants and high officials came running to get the mantle so urgently needed for the important affair.

But no sooner had I sewn on a feather than the one previously fixed flew away again.

Then there were thousands of marshals, generals, and courtiers surrounding my art shop and yelling at the top of their voices: "The coronation necklace! The feather necklace! Where are the armlets of gold? Quick, oh, ever so quick! We all have to die! We are all condemned to death! We are flown to death!"

In my great hurry to finish the mantle in spite of all obstacles, I became slightly careless while reaching for a needle, and there the mantle seized upon that opportunity, jumped to the open

door, walked down the path of my bungalow, turned to where the mound was, and flew away.

It was still flying high up in the air when suddenly all the thousands and thousands of feathers, which, in so many sleepless nights, for thirteen weeks, I had sewn on with so much labor, fell off the mantle and winged away, chirping like birds and disappearing in all directions.

I woke up and heard the millions of crickets and grasshoppers fiddling, twittering and whistling in the bush.

XX

Once again I fell asleep, certain of the fact that I was well in my room and on my cot and that the coronation mantle of the emperor of Anáhuac might well take care of itself, leaving to a skilled Indian artist the task of making a gorgeous feather mantle, while King Netzuhualcoyotl could write the poems for the great event.

And then the door of the room in which I slept suddenly swung open.

This surprised me, because I remembered very well that I had not only locked the door but had also bolted it firmly with a heavy bar. In spite of that care; the door opened, and in

came my visitor, the same Indian I had seen falling to dust only twelve hours ago.

The room was lighted by a strange pale light, not unlike a thin but glittering bright fog. I could not make out the source of the light. It was not the moon. The moon had gone down awhile ago. It was just a diffused silvery mist which filled the room and seemed, somehow, to move. The idea struck me that this might be the tail of a comet passing the Earth.

The Indian came close to my cot. He stood there very calmly, looking me full in the face.

I had my eyes wide open, though I felt that I could not move should I want to. No longer did I seem to have any will of my own.

I was under the impression that if I wanted to move, I would first have to find my will again. It was as if my will had slipped away from me like the feathers of a coronation mantle carelessly sewn on.

I felt no fear, no fear of ghosts or of any danger threatening me. Quite the contrary. There was about me a rich and wonderful feeling of true friendship and of immaterial love such as I could not remember ever having felt before, not even in the presence of my mother. I thought that if a similar state of feeling

should accompany me when I was about to die, I would believe nothing greater than death.

My visitor lifted the mosquito bar and laid the flap on top of the netting. This he did with a solemn gesture, as if it had been part of a ceremony.

In spite of the fact that we were no longer separated by this thin tissue, the floating diffused light filling the room did not change. I had thought that perhaps the strange light had been caused by my seeing the room through the white veil-like mosquito netting.

He greeted me in the same manner as he had on the two previous nights. Again he looked at me with profound earnestness and for a long while.

At last he spoke, spoke slowly so as to give each word its full meaning and weight.

"I ask you, my friend, do you believe it right to rob somebody who is defenseless and take away from him those little tokens which are his only companions on his long journey to the land of shadows? Who was it that gave me these little gifts? They were given to me by those who loved me, by those whom I loved dearly, by those who shed so many, many bitter tears when I had to leave them. I want so very much to make you understand that these tokens brighten

up my road through the long night.

"For love, and for nothing but love, is man born into this world. It is only for love that man lives. What else is the purpose of man on Earth? Man may win honors, man may win fame, man may win the high estimation of his fellow men, man may win riches, unheard-of riches. Yet all this, however great it may appear at first sight, as compared to love counts for nothing. Before the Great Gate, through which all of us have to go some day, even our most sincere prayers sent to heaven are valued no better than cheap bribes offered with the mean intention of winning special favors from the One who cannot be but just and Who is by far too great to consider prayers.

"Face to face with eternity, only love counts. Only the love we gave and only the love we received in return for our love will be taken into account. In the face of the Everlasting, we will be measured only according to the amount of our love. Therefore, my friend, pray return to me these little tokens which you took away from me, misunderstanding their meaning. Return them to me tonight, because, after my long journey to the Great Gate, I shall need them. When I shall be ques-

tioned then, 'Where are your credentials, newcomer?' I must have them with me so that I may answer, 'Behold here, oh, my Creator, here in my hands I carry my credentials. Few and small are these gifts, true, but that I was allowed to have them with me and wear them all along my way here—this is my evidence that I, too, was loved while on Earth, and so, my Lord and Maker, since I was loved, I cannot be entirely without worth.'

The voice faded off into a deep silence.

It was not his eloquence; it was the profound silence, taking full possession of the whole room like a visible power commanding words, things, doings, which influenced all my acts from then on.

I rose from the cot, dressed quickly, put on my boots and went to the book-shelf.

I opened the little package, hung the necklace about his neck, put the thick ring on his forefinger, shoved the golden armlets up his arms, and put the anklets around his legs.

Then he was gone.

The door was closed and bolted heavily as before.

I returned to my cot, lay down and fell asleep at once.

My sleep was as deep, as dreamless, as wholesome as is the first refreshing, sound sleep

after a long illness. For weeks I had not slept so well as I did that night.

XXI

It was late when I woke up the next morning.

I felt so fully reanimated, so rich with energy, that it seemed the whole world could be mine just for the taking.

In remembering the dream which I had had during the night, I thought that never before had I had a dream in which every detail had been so clear, so logical as this last one. It could not have been more clear and impressive if it had not been a dream at all but an episode of the day, a slightly strange episode, but nonetheless real and natural.

I looked for my boots.

Why, they were not stuffed with paper and neither were they placed on a chair. Experience had taught me, when living in the jungle, to stuff my boots with balls of crumpled paper or something else, and to put them on a chair or box or hang them up. Otherwise, when you started to pull them on in the morning, you might find a scorpion or a small snake inside them. It had happened to me before. I still remembered the speed with which I got the boots off on

that occasion, and since then I know that one may get his boots off just as quickly as a hat from one's head. To have a little red snake in the lowest part of your boot while your foot is inside is not so very pleasant either, because the snake, as terrified as you are, wants to get out, as do your feet. The worst thing about it is that you don't know exactly what it is that's under the sole of your foot. It drives you nearly crazy while your foot is still in, and makes you feel aghast with horror after your foot is out and you see what was, or still is, a tenant of your boot.

Anyway, my boots were not stuffed and they were not standing on the chair.

All of a sudden I remembered that I had dropped the boots rather carelessly last night, owing to the fact that I was very tired when I turned in again after the Indian had left. I remembered, too, that while he had been in the room I had pulled out the paper from my boots and had put them on to go to the room when the bookshelves were. It is no sound practice, when living in the jungle, to walk with bare feet by night. A native can do so, but a white man with some experience avoids it. When I had come from the other room I had lain down immediately on my cot, not paying any attention

to the boots or anything else, and had fallen asleep as soon as I had touched the pillow.

Had I really dreamed that or had I not?

One long jump and I was at the book-shelf.

The can was not there. I looked around and found it thrown on the table, open and empty. The paper in which I had wrapped the jewelry lay torn and in scraps about the floor. No sign of the ornaments anywhere, no indications where they might be.

The door was still locked and well-bolted, exactly as I had fixed it last night before turning in.

I hustled to the mound.

In feverish haste I cleared the pit of the stones, the earth, and the shrubs with which I had filled up the excavation last afternoon.

Nothing was on the bottom. No clue to where the ornaments might have been hidden.

Where, for all the foolish and silly dreams of mine, had I put those things while asleep? Or was I walking in my sleep? Impossible. It couldn't be.

No matter how hard I worked my mind and my memory, I had not the slightest hunch to follow up. I searched the whole house, in every nook and corner. I moved all boxes and cases

about. Every loose board was inspected. I opened sacks and investigated every pot in the house and in the yard. Nothing. Nothing in the house nor about the house nor around the house nor on top of the house. Nothing anywhere.

Perhaps . . . perhaps the hogs.

It was silly to think of the hogs in relation to the ornaments.

I might try, anyway.

XXII

Two weeks later, the doctor returned.

My first question after he had seated himself was, "Say, Doc, have you ever noticed three hogs around the place here? I refer to certain hogs, two black ones and one yellow, all three practically the same size, the cheap Indian kind, sort of hairy."

"Three hogs?" he asked. "Three hogs, you say?" He looked at me, rather appraisingly, I thought. "Hogs?" Again he repeated his question in a queer tone as if he had perhaps not heard right.

There was something in the tone of his voice and in the way he stared at me. It might have been a well-concealed, though firm, examination of my mental soundness.

"Hogs," he said again. "Is

that it—hogs? With some people it is mice. White ones. Sometimes green ones. With others it is ants. With some, a strange kind of mosquitoes or bats. With you, it is hogs. Something new in pathology. I am quite sure, old man, you mean dogs. D, D, D, and not H, H, H. Understand, Gales, it is D, D, D, dogs, dogs, dogs. Three dogs. Two black ones and one yellow, all nearly the same size, and hairy, too. Just mongrels, the sort the Indians have. I am positive, old chap, that you mean dogs. It is just the tongue sometimes which mixes up one certain letter with another. We know this trick of dropping words and taking one letter for another without realizing it. Apart from that, you're right. I've seen about this place here, and at various times too, three dogs, two black ones, and one yellow. I've even asked people to whom they might belong.

"Nobody seems to know them. What is more, no native around here seems ever to have seen them. Anyway, it's none of my business to look out for stray dogs. To the devil with them. Dogs, or hogs, or pox, what the hell do I care about stray animals. Let's talk about something else. Dogs. I don't wish to talk about these three dogs, do you hear? Why did you have to bring them

up right when I come home and wish to feel easy and happy again with the sun and the jungle and all the things I've missed during these last weeks. I'm happy to be back here. Why, for heaven's sake, do you have to speak about dogs?"

"Why? See here, Doc—listen to what has happened to me and you will understand the *why*."

I told my story, leaving out no detail.

I had expected to see him go wild over it. Since I had seen his library, I knew how much he would be interested in things like the ones I was so anxious to get off my mind.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," he said. "What is it you mean to tell me? A dead Indian—that's what you're telling me about? A dead Indian coming to visit you on two nights?" He shrugged his shoulders in a way to indicate that such affairs happened to him thirty times every month.

After awhile, though, he again began searching every line of my face with the piercing eyes of a suspicious doctor.

"Ornaments? You mean ornaments and not something else? You are sure? Just ornaments? Ancient, too? Ancient Aztec craftsmanship? Ancient? And you, in person, have held them in your hands? Now they have

disappeared? As if in thin air? And you don't know where they are now? That's something. That could almost induce me to take up practice again. I thought it was only hogs. I see now it's worse. Well, well—and right here at my place, too. Well, well. . . ."

His bone-dry irony made me furious.

I said, more harshly than politely, "So you don't believe it, sir? So you don't believe me? Perhaps you think my mind has snapped? Do you mean to say that? Well, doctor, this time you're mistaken. If you don't believe me, I'll show you the mound right now, hardly a hundred yards away. I can also show you the thirteen stone steps leading up to the top of that little pyramid. What is more, I can even show you the cave I excavated. What do you say now, my friend?"

He had let me talk without once interrupting me. Now he only grinned.

He nodded in a fatherly manner, as if listening to the report of a patient whom he knew to be lying terribly, and slowly fumbled his pipe out of his pocket.

In a very dry, almost sleepy tone, he said, "I, too, can show you a cave which I dug around here some place. More than just

one. In fact, I can show you several of them. But it can't happen to me any more. I am over it. I have been over it for a long time."

Now it was I who looked at him with questioning eyes. But he said no more about his own adventures.

He lit his pipe and puffed at it a few times, then took it from his mouth and rested his hand on his knee. "Well, old fellow," he said, "here's my advice, as a good friend and as a doctor. You'd better go down to one of the villages, any of the villages will do, and hire yourself a cook. See to it that she is a good-looker, a young one, and not so very dirty. I can assure you, old man, that with a good-looking cook about your place, no dead Indians will ever bother you again. And no ornaments, ancient or modern, will make you get up at night and put your boots on. No charge for this advice, Gales. It's given free and out of a long experience. Besides, I owe you something for minding my place while I was away. I brought you five pounds of the very best tobacco I could find. Take it. You are welcome."

XXIII

"Welcome."

The word lodged itself

strangely in my mind. It would not leave me. It went on and on, pricking in my head. *Welcome? Am I really welcome?*

No. I was not welcome. I was not welcome there any longer. Something had been destroyed, inside of me, or outside of me, or somewhere in the far distance. I could not tell what had been destroyed, nor where. I was no longer the same. No longer was the bush the same—at least not to me. I felt horror where before I had felt heavenly quiet.

And suddenly I longed for a change.

He had seen three dogs, of the hairy Indian kind, two black ones and one yellow. I had seen, positively, three hogs, of the hairy Indian kind, two black ones and one yellow. The worst thing of all, however, would be if I were to happen to see exactly the same three dogs he had seen.

Should that happen to me, I would not have the strength to survive the day. He had survived many such days. Of this I was sure. I could not. He was of another make, Doc was.

I asked him whether I might stay for another night with him in the bungalow.

This granted, I now asked him, "Listen, Doc, you're a heavy smoker yourself, aren't you?"

"Why — yes — eh — I don't quite—"

"I wanted to make sure of that, Doc," I said. "Good night. I'll turn in. Time for the little ones to go to bed."

"Good night," he answered. While I was fixing the mosquito bar, I noticed that Doc was rubbing his chin and watching me with a strange stare in his eyes.

Next morning, while we had breakfast on the porch, I said, "What do you say, Doc? Could I maybe sell you four pounds of that fine tobacco which you brought me from back home?"

"Why, man, I gave it to you. What's the matter with it? It's very good tobacco. The best there is. Don't you like it, or what?"

"You see, Doc," I said, "it's this way. I'd like to have you buy these four pounds for, let's say, twenty-five pesos, cash."

"Why, of course, if you wish to dispose of it that way and buy your native brand for the money, that's absolutely okay with me. Fact is, I'll be in dire need of good tobacco myself in a few weeks. I couldn't bring much along. You know, the duty is awfully high."

"I won't buy another brand for the money, Doc," I said. "It isn't that, you see. I'm satisfied with just one pound for the time being. What I really need is the cash I asked you for."

"May I ask what you need

the money for, if it isn't a secret?"

"No secret. No secret at all, Doc. It's simply this way. I mean to clear out of here. I turned everything over in my mind last night. You see, Doc, that prescription of yours concerning the good-looking cook won't do any good. It's too late now. It might have been good six, even three, months ago. Now it wouldn't work out. I know that. And no doubt about it, either."

"Well, what about your farm? The money you've invested in it and all your hard work is worth more than the money you paid. You don't mean to tell me that you're leaving all that for nothing."

"That's about the size of it, Doc," I said. "Yeah, I'll leave it for nothing to anyone who comes along and picks it up. The bush may have it back. It belongs to the bush, anyway. Everything here belongs to the bush. I don't. And the bush is welcome to it, and with my best wishes thrown into the bargain. I hope the bush can keep it until the world's end. Congratulations."

"As you say, Gales. I certainly won't persuade you to stay on and try just once more. You're old enough to know what you want and what is good for you. You don't eat green apples any more. Well, there's your money.

If you mean to go by rail, you can sell your pony down at the depot. Anyone will take it for a fair price. I'm quite sure you'll get forty for it if you start asking ninety."

I noted that his face changed while he was talking, and now he moved his lips as he usually did when he was thinking hard.

He turned around and walked over to the corner of the porch and gazed down over the jungle ocean.

He took a deep breath, then said, "I wish I could go with you, Gales. I wish I could leave as easily as you can. Yet I can't. I can't any more. I'm bound here, damn it. I'm buried here, bone, soul, heart, flesh, everything. Only ashes it is that remain, and only ashes it is that you see. All of me is buried here. Only the mind is still alive. Sometimes I think that even my mind has gone to sleep, too, and only my former thoughts are still lingering about. I must stay here where my bones and my soul are resting. I can't leave them behind and all alone. You see, the thing is that I'm buried here in more than just one way. Well, what I was going to—was going to—to—"

He stared out into the far distance as if he were looking beyond the world. And as I had thought several times before in

the earliest days of our acquaintance, so I thought at this moment again: He has died long, long ago, the doc has, only he doesn't know it. And that's the reason, the one and only reason, why he is still hanging on.

He turned to face me. "Of course, I'll lend you a mule to carry your few things to the depot. Leave the animal with the Straddlers until I call for it. Well, if the Lord only would have mercy and grant me that I could go with you, be free and easy like you, going where you wish and where your lucky star will lead you. Well, Gales, it was a great pleasure to have known you. I mean it, old chap. Since it has to be this way, good luck and goodbye."

XXIV

It was the next day, late in the afternoon, when I bounced ten pesos silver upon the narrow board over which a hole in the wooden wall signified the ticket-seller's window.

"Which way does the next train go?" I asked. "West or east?"

"*Oeste*. West, I mean," the man behind the window said.

"A ticket for ten pesos, please. Second class."

"What station?"

"Just a ticket for ten pesos

anywhere west. It doesn't make any difference."

The station master looked up the list.

"There's one ticket for nine eighty-five and the next one is for ten seventy. Which will it be?"

"Make mine nine eighty-five, and that will be good enough for me any time now or tomorrow."

"There you are," he said. "Fifteen centavos change. There she is pulling in, right on time. Rare thing, if you ask me."

I did not look at the station's name printed on the ticket. One station was as good as another so far as I was concerned. If you are to find a gold mine, you may as well wreck your house and dig up the ground below the basement. The place is as near to your fortune as any other if you're the guy to get what you want or what is meant for you to have.

I boarded the train. The conductor came up to me. He took my ticket, glanced at the name of the station, shook his head as though somewhat bewildered, stared at me for awhile without saying a word, and then crossed something out on the ticket with a thick blue pencil. He put the ticket away in his pocket and handed me instead a slip of paper on which he, with the same thick blue pencil, had written

something in Chinese. When he saw me helplessly fingering that slip he pitied me with a deep sigh, took it away from me and pushed that slip into my hat ribbon. "That's your hat, mister, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"I'll call you in time to get off the train," he said. "Don't worry. Just keep quiet, take a nap, and don't worry a bit. Did you understand what I said?"

"You said something about worrying."

"The other way around, mister. I said you should not worry a bit. I'll see to it that you get off at the right place. So take it easy. Everything will be all right."

He gave me an assuring smile, nodded in a fatherly manner as if he were dealing with a little boy riding for the first time on a train all by himself, and went his way.

The coach was poorly lighted. There was nothing to do but doze off.

After I had slept what I thought must have been sixty hours or more, I was pushed on the shoulders and I heard a voice. "Next station's yours. Got five minutes. Better shake out of it and get ready. We don't stop there, and if we've got a passenger the engine only slows down a bit. Far as I can remem-

ber . . . well, as long as I'm in service on this line . . . we've never had a passenger get off there. And neither has one ever got on. You'd better hurry, mister, and take care not to drop under the wheels. That would be just too bad. I'll throw your bags out of the window. You just pick them up once you're off and outside. Good night."

"What time is it, conductor?" I asked.

"Twelve. Middle of the night, you know. A clear beautiful night as far as I can judge. All the stars are bright like diamonds. Well, mister, there you are. Good night. *Buenas noches.*"

The train slowed down. My bags were already out. I jumped off, keeping clear of the wheels.

Before I had come to my full senses and had realized what had happened and that I had jumped into darkness, the last car of the train had already passed by, and a few seconds later I could see only a little flicker of the red tail light.

Looking around from where I stood, I saw no building, no house, no shed; nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Nothing except a post with a piece of board nailed to it.

I went close, lit a match and looked at the board. There were a few blots which, a hundred years ago, might have been a name painted on the board.

No light other than that of the stars could be seen anywhere, near or far.

I picked up my bags and sat down on one of them.

Less than fifty feet from either side of the track stood the wall of the bush.

A wall, dense, dry, dreary, greenish-gray, now looking black, looking in the darkness as though it were stooping slowly though irresistibly upon me where I sat, threatening to suck me into its fangs, intending to swallow me, to swallow all of me, bone, flesh, heart, soul, everything.

Who had said that to me many years ago, and where had it been said? My effort to remember this kept my mind busy for the next two or three hours.

The air was filled with chirping, whispering, murmuring, fiddling, whining, whimpering, now and then shrills and shrieks of fear and horror.

The bush was singing its eternal song of stories, each story beginning with the last line of the story just ended.

The GENTLEMAN IS AN EPWA

By CARL JACOBI

Grayson was a good colonial official, but Rafael was better. And Rafael was an Epwa.

WHATEVER you might say about Grayson, he was a good 'colonial official. He was forty, which is a bit old for an Earthman to hold down an in-country post on Venus, but he had been in the Service eighteen years and his record as *contrôleur* was unimpeachable.

In those eighteen years he had banged about quite a bit, yet one would never guess it to hear him talk. Personal reminiscences were rare with him; he much preferred a game of chess or simply his pipe and a chair on the veranda, the last an architectural addition he had insisted on before taking over the Residency here at Blue Mold.

It had made the post odd looking, to say the least. There was the white walled dome, fashioned of steel-bound concrete, set down in the midst of that swamp wilderness like a half-submerged baseball. There were the latticed antenna towers for the radio that somehow never worked. And clapped on to one



side of the dome, incongruous and unsightly, was that veranda of Venusian bamboo and nipa thatch.

Grayson was sitting there, enjoying the comparative cool of the evening after an unusually humid day, when his ear caught the rhythmic purr of an electric launch somewhere beyond the screening wall of lathea trees. "That will be Parkhurst," he said to himself, rising. "It's about time."

For five weeks he had been alone, and more than anything he wanted company. It was just five weeks ago to the day that young Oberlin, his Assistant, had been taken sick with fever. Grayson had packed him off in the post gig while he was still able to get about.

"Tell Parkhurst to send me another as good as you," he had said, not unkindly. "You deserve a better place than this anyway."

Grayson opened the screen door and made his way down the catwalk to the jetty. The last glimmers of daylight were just passing. In the gloom, silhouetted against the lighter glow of open water, he saw the launch turn inshore and head in for a landing.

A moment later he caught a line and secured it to the bollards as a tall, gangling man leaped onto the jetty.

"Hullo, Grayson," the man said. "How's every little thing?"

Grayson shook hands warmly but cast a surprised eye down into the launch. "Everything's fine, sir," he said, "but where's my new Assistant?"

Parkhurst smiled. "We'll discuss that later. Right now I could do with a drink and a chance to stretch my legs. I would have taken a 'copter, but you know how those things act up over this infernal bog . . ."

In puzzled silence, Grayson led the way back to the veranda, switched on a lamp and an insect-repellent tube and got out glasses and a bottle of Earthside whiskey. Parkhurst lingered over his drink luxuriously. He was a big man, almost completely bald save for a fringe of reddish hair just above the ears, and there was an air of efficiency about him in spite of his bulk.

"It was a good idea, sending Oberlin back when you did," he said. "The medics at the base found he had incipient mold fever. That can be pretty nasty, but fortunately they caught it before it got a start. I read your report too. You're doing a good job here, Grayson. I don't mind telling you that this post is better managed than any in Venus South."

He went on, discussing the weather, giving the idle gossip of

the base which under ordinary circumstances would have held Grayson in rapt attention. Tonight, however, the *contrôleur* writhed under the delay. At length he could stand it no longer.

"In my report, sir, I asked for another Assistant. I don't mind the swamp, though it can be pretty bad at times, but it's no place for a man alone. The psychos said that when they laid out this place, and . . ."

Parkhurst smiled like a man withholding something until the last possible moment.

"Oh, I brought your Assistant all right."

"You did?" said Grayson, looking bewildered. "Then where . . .?"

"He's in the launch," chuckled Parkhurst. "Under the hatch."

"Under the hatch . . .!"

"Perhaps I'd better explain," said Parkhurst. "Your Assistant —his name is Rafael, by the way —comes directly from the Ensenada Production Works at Madrid, on Earth. He represents the latest electronic development and scientific research of the present day. He . . ."

"Just a minute, sir." A horribly chilling thought had suddenly struck Grayson. "Are you telling me that you've brought a robot?"

Parkhurst got a cheroot out of his pocket and lit it slowly. "Not exactly," he said. "Wait, I'll go down to the launch and get him."

Grayson's fists clenched as his superior went out the screen door and disappeared into the blackness. Parkhurst was gone only a moment. When he reappeared, a second figure was at his heels. As they entered the ellipse of light, Grayson stared, then felt his misgivings pass.

The newcomer was tall and erect, a man who appeared to be about thirty-five, with strong aquiline features, clad in a suit of whites, plastic insect boots and a mold-protector helmet.

"This is Rafael, your new Assistant," Parkhurst said. "He's an Epwa."

Grayson grinned. "Glad to know you," he said cordially. Then: "Pardon my ignorance, but what the devil's an Epwa?"

The shock was quick in coming. The hand he stretched out closed over fingers that gave like flesh but were cold as metal to the touch. A voice said tonelessly:

"How do you do. Yes, I am an Epwa. The word is derived from the name, Ensenada Production Works Assembly, where I was created. I hope our relationship will be a mutually favorable one."

So they had sent him a mechanical contrivance in place of an Assistant! Grayson could feel the indignation rise like a hot flush within him. And after eighteen years! That's what came of giving the best part of one's life to this damned colonial service. Probably thought he was getting old, and this was a polite way of telling him he'd better look to his retirement. Grayson remembered with a pang the days of his youth on Earth. He had been something then. He had graduated from Western Hemisphere College, but he had pushed his way through school by his own bootstraps. His father had been nothing more than Third Engineer on a space freighter. Grayson gloried in the fact that he had been accepted by the new post-atomic aristocracy on the basis of intelligence alone. Out here on Venus South he had managed to preserve his mental superiority through his dealings with the Venusians, who were, according to the Mokart, anthropological scale, a decidedly inferior race.

He looked again at Rafael, and was astonished at the life-like qualities of the new Assistant. Save for a frozen immobility of countenance—the eyes did not wink and there was no movement of the features except when he spoke—the impres-

sion that he was facing a human was overpowering.

Parkhurst smiled as he witnessed Grayson's astonishment. "You're behind the times, old man. Wonders have been done in electronics during the last decade. Rafael here can do everything a man can do, and is a damned sight more efficient. He requires no food or sleep. He will obey commands as far as his powers of visibility will allow. Moreover, he records all those commands on an internal chart for future reference. He can talk and answer questions, though naturally his abilities in that field are somewhat limited. But he can hold up his end of the conversation—just so he isn't required to do so too often. A background of personal memoirs has been recorded on his brain. His outer covering, which, as you see, has been tinted to resemble flesh, is formed of the new *transluk* plastic which permits his entire workings to become visible when an inner light is switched on. He's as good as, and probably better than, any assistant you could possibly get."

Grayson sank back in his chair with a look of awe. "Are there a lot of these . . . these Epwas . . . back on Earth?"

"No." Parkhurst shook his head slowly. "Not yet, at any rate. Public reaction has been

somewhat antagonistic to them, so far. That's why we're trying them out here in the colonies first."

TWO HOURS later Parkhurst shook hands, reentered the launch and disappeared into the swamp darkness. As he paced back down the catwalk, Grayson's first emotion was one of embarrassment. How to treat Rafael? Like any other mechanical contrivance with which the post was equipped—the automatic ventilators and air filters, the storm-warning gadgets, the radar screen which kept him appraised of the movements and activities of the neighboring Venusian tribes? Or should be establish a quasi-human relationship, as one would with an uneducated native or a child?

Upon reaching the veranda, Grayson said self-consciously, "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters."

Rafael nodded and rose jerkily from the chair. Passing through the central quarters of the dome, lit now by a soft glow of hidden lights, Grayson noted with some irritation that the Assistant was so light on his feet no sound of his steps could be heard. He opened the door of the spare bedroom, and Rafael stepped inside.

"I get up at seven," the Earth-

man said. "You will go down to the spring and bring back a bucket of fresh water some time before that. The water system here is temporarily out of order, and I haven't got around to repairing it yet."

Rafael said, "I understand. Where is the spring?"

The question was flat and toneless, but distinct. Then Grayson remembered: the Assistant could obey commands only as far as his visibility went. He'd have to give detailed directions.

"The spring is approximately fifty yards from the dome," he explained. "You go down the catwalk as far as the jetty, then turn right on the path there." He added, "Be careful not to stray off the path. Quicksand, you know."

Rafael said, "I understand. Spring, fifty yards, path, quicksand."

Grayson went across to his room, undressed, and lay down on his bed. He tried to sleep but lay there wide awake instead, while troubled thoughts milled in his brain. What the devil was wrong with them at the base? It was companionship he needed here at Blue Mold. One man could easily take care of the duties, but one man would go quite mad if left in this swamp alone for any length of time. It wasn't so much the silence or the

incredible isolation, though they were bad enough. It was the subtle, insidious alien quality of the marsh, that worked slowly into a man's mind and took hold there like a living thing. Wherever one went there was mold, blue parasitical mold that came drifting down from the thick sky like balls of indigo cotton. Where it landed, it adhered with leech-like tenacity, developing rootlets, growing, spreading with loathsome speed. The roiling water was blue, the cat-tail trees were blue, the marsh grass, the Venusian bamboo, the very air had a bluish cast to it. And the damnable color was endemic; already Grayson had detected bluish spots at his fingertips and along the under side of his arms.

The Venusian tribes who looked to him as their magistrate seemed to thrive in these surroundings. But they were a low-caliber lot, semi-nomadic, too shiftless to build decent, permanent habitations.

About midnight Grayson finally fell into a restless sleep. He dreamed unpleasant dreams of pulling a launch through the shore ooze of the great swamp—like a boatman on the Volga—while four Epwas, all precisely alike, cracked whips and urged him on. When he finally awoke, it was with the leaden sensation that no time at all had

elapsed. He felt better, however, after he had showered and dressed, and when he went into central-quarters an agreeable sight met his gaze. On the table was a flagon of cold water. Rafael stood in the center of the room, motionless, apparently awaiting commands.

Breakfast over, Grayson crossed to his desk at the far side of the room to lay out his work for the day. This was the part of the morning he enjoyed best. Here he could sit amid the pleasant disorderliness of piled papers, pencils, pipes and his books on Venusian *lepidopters* and briefly plan his work for the next seven or eight hours. The fact that he never followed through on these plans troubled him not at all. Grayson wasn't a tidy man; he did things in a hit-or-miss fashion, although in the end he usually managed to accomplish what he had set out to do.

Two feet away from his desk, he stopped, staring. Gone were the familiar piles of paper. In their place was a naked expanse of desk surface, the dark *won-won* wood polished to the nines. His pipes were neatly arrayed in the rack on the wall; his books, three of which he had left open to passages he wanted to re-read, were closed and stacked, bindings out, on the desk top.

Grayson's face slowly drained of color. Like all untidy men, he hated to have his personal possessions disturbed. He swung around and called Rafael.

The Assistant approached quietly.

"After this," Grayson said, controlling his anger with an effort, "you will touch nothing on this desk at all. Do you understand? Nothing at all. As far as you're concerned, this desk is tabu . . . *verboten*."

The Assistant said, "Desk . . . not touch . . . I understand."

IT WAS a full week before Grayson adjusted himself to the presence of his new companion; but never, he told himself, could he quite accept the fact that Rafael was not human. Several times he had ordered the Assistant to stand still while he switched on the light that lit up his interior. Then he stood there and marveled at the world of wires, electronic tubes, and resistors which made up the Assistant's system.

But, as Parkhurst had said, Rafael was efficient. He performed every duty expertly and completely. His memory was prodigious; he needed to be told only once to do a task. It was this very efficiency that began to eat away, like drops of falling water, at Grayson's usual aplomb.

Unconsciously he fell to watching the Assistant in his various performances for something to criticize. He found nothing. Moreover, Rafael was at all times a gentleman, which Grayson was not. It infuriated the Earthman to receive a soft-spoken, genteel reply in answer to one of his own that was barbed with profanity.

"Rafael, get me my meerschaum pipe."

"Meerschaum . . . I do not understand the word, sir."

"Idiot! It's the white one on the desk."

"Des . . . desk. I am not to touch anything on the desk, sir."

"Damn you, you're to do as I say. Get the pipe."

But Grayson remembered one detail of Rafael's construction very well, and he took pains to act accordingly. The Assistant's internal chart recorded all the commands given him. It would not do to send him about on false missions.

It had been the last day of January when Rafael had been brought to the post. Now it was getting on to the middle of February, and on the fifteenth, certain as clockwork, the rainy-mold season would begin. That meant for exactly thirty days they would be confined to the dome. Weather changes went off with machine precision here in Venus

South, and during the *rm* days an Earthman's life wasn't worth a single credit if he exposed himself to the elements in the great swamp.

On the fourteenth he said to Rafael, "You will leave at once for Village Xanon, see the headman and find out why the regular tax payment has not been made. Village Xanon is approximately ten kilometers from here. It lies inland due East, and there is a trail of plastic discs mounted on trees at regular intervals. Be back here by tomorrow noon at the latest."

A slight whirring issued from the Assistant's head as he mulled over this information.

After Rafael had gone, Grayson settled back in the chair and lit his pipe, feeling extremely satisfied. He had given the Assistant a metal umbrella to fend off the falling mold spores, but during the *rm* days that was scant protection. And *rm* started tomorrow. Although he would not admit it to himself, Grayson hoped Rafael would not return. Then when Parkhurst came for his regular inspection trip in March, he could say, "Send me down another Assistant, will you. And make it an Earthman this time. That last contraption of yours wasn't very . . . durable."

But Rafael did come back. He came back with his new insect

boots stained and plastered with mud, with his suit of whites ripped and torn and his face mottled from contact with mold spores. He brought not only the overdue tax payment but also a small bag woven of blue ipso grass.

"What's this, Rafael?"

"A personal gift, sir."

"A gift?"

"From the Venusians, sir. They . . . like me."

IT WAS the evenings that Grayson always disliked. Where the average Earthman finds this a time to relax and review the events of the day, Grayson always saw himself a day older, another period of frustration ticked off in a life that had been one large disappointment. He was tired then, too, even though the day's activities had been light, but weariness was a feeling unknown to Rafael.

Grayson began to hate the sight of the Assistant, always so fresh, so composed, always so ready to respond to his every command. The fact that Rafael needed no sleep to revitalize his energy led the Earthman to wonder what occupied the Assistant's thoughts during the lonely hours of the night. That was absurd, of course. An Epwa couldn't think in the abstract sense. Yet, as if to refute this, Rafael was always

ready to launch into a series of personal reminiscences whenever the silence hung heavy in the dome. Grayson knew those tales and anecdotes were part of a fabricated past skillfully woven into Rafael's brain by his manufacturers, but the effect of reality was always there.

"Did I ever tell you of the time I was lost on Mars' red desert?"

"Yes, you did, Rafael. Keep your machine-made recollections to yourself."

As the days of his enforced stay in the dome dragged past, a kind of tension began to build up in the Earthman. Grayson sought to fight this tension by making himself physically slack. He neglected the first rule of a colonial on any of the backward planets, that of dressing for dinner and shaving every day. Yet although a disregard for these habits helped to alleviate the nervous strain, he was horribly aware that the Assistant needed no such indulgences.

And then, as suddenly as they had begun, the rain and the mold ended. But, with a richer luxuriance than before, caused by the excessive moisture, the blue vegetation now took on a purplish hue that spread itself quickly across the great marsh. Grayson felt the tension within him increase rather than lessen.

To make matters worse, the Indigo birds—*Ornithopterazure*—changed their migration habits and came down from Venus North, nesting in vast numbers about the post. A repulsive scavenger species with razor-sharp beaks and long, saurian tails, they had an unpleasant trick of directing their attack against the eyes. Grayson found it necessary to carry a weapon with him whenever he left the dome. The birds stayed two weeks. They gave way to the *Lyzata*, equally horrible, who were fur-bearing serpents of python size and who, though harmless, crawled over everything like enormous caterpillars.

IN THE early part of April Grayson realized quite suddenly that native conditions in his sector of Venus South had gone from bad to worse. Neither Village Xanon nor any of the other *pabongs* had followed up on their regular monthly tax payments. Furthermore, when he occasionally met a Venusian on the jungle trail, the native stared at him impudently and made no move to bow, a recognition which the *contrôleur* always insisted upon. Grayson had only contempt for these swamp creatures, and his dealings with them, as overlord, were touched with cruelty and arrogance. Two

years ago he had found it necessary to whip a Venusian *arcolat* within an inch of his life, because the scoundrel had failed to wash his filthy hands before preparing food that had been presented to the Earthman.

When Grayson went to Village Xanon to see about the tax, he was met with open resentment. The grizzled old chief replied he could not pay for five days, and no amount of threatening could alter his stand.

"Great sir, why do you not send the-man-who-cannot-smile to our *pabong*? He is kind and considerate and speaks to us softly."

Grayson stiffened. "The-man-who-cannot-smile! You mean Rafael?"

"That is his name. Yes."

The Earthman controlled his rage with difficulty.

"Get this through your head," he replied. "It makes no difference who comes to collect—you'll pay! Understand?"

Then he did something that violated one of the most stringent rules of a Venus colonial. He struck the chief across the mouth with the flat of his hand. All too well, Grayson knew that to a Venusian the body of a chief is considered inviolable.

Returning by the back trail to the dome, the *contrôleur* told

himself it was time indeed to get rid of his Epwa Assistant. Not only was Rafael a calculating, errorless machine who could offer no normal companionship, he was disturbing the morale of the entire native organization. Let him stay on here with his equality treatment of the Venusians and the situation would shortly become unbearable.

Grayson mulled this over after he had reached the post.

He knew he could get rid of Rafael by no regular channels. Parkhurst was a straight-laced fool to whom rules and regulations were gods to be obeyed at all costs. He would never consent to replace the Assistant unless he were given a logical reason. Moreover Rafael's internal chart effectually blocked any move by which the Assistant might be made to do harm to himself.

The *contrôleur* set about devising plans and putting them into action.

He carefully changed the plastic discs trail markings so that instead of leading to Xanon Village they wound deeper into a remote section of the swamp.

But although he was gone a day longer, Rafael came back from his mission, bringing the overdue tax payment plus more

gifts the Venusians had given him.

Grayson next dispatched Rafael, via the spare gig, in-country some eighteen kilometers to investigate a report that a saurian beast had been seen in that area. Before the Assistant left Grayson drilled several holes in the gig below the water line and plugged them with quick-melting *cozar*, a kind of beeswax found in the swamp.

But again the Assistant returned and placidly made his report.

There was no beast but only an oddly shaped rock outcropping which the natives had mistaken at a distance. Grayson nodded silently and this time asked no questions.

Instead he went out the screen door, paced into the compound and halted a short distance from the dome, staring up into the thick sky. Moments passed, and he glanced at his watch impatiently.

Abruptly a high pitched scream of air sounded. An instant later the aluminum shell landed, half burying itself in the spongy soil.

Some day, the men back at the base who figured the trajectory of this mail cartridge were going to miscalculate and hit the dome. Grayson picked up the shell, unscrewed its cap and dumped out

its contents: mostly magazines and newspapers, a few letters.

The Earthman always went over his mail thoroughly. There were several copies of *Colonial Spaceways*, one of which contained an article, "The Future of the Epwa," which he read with a good deal of interest. There were also two decks of playing cards sent by a thoughtful friend in Venus City.

One passage in the Epwa article he read several times:

Under average conditions the Epwa is a highly developed mechanism which is practically indestructible. Care should be taken, however, not to subject its mental powers to sustained strain over a long period of time. Failure to heed this warning may result in a complete breakdown of the device's electronic brain.

The *contrôleur* rose and called Rafael. When the Assistant appeared, Grayson took one of the decks of cards and tossed it on the table.

"I'll show you a game," he said, "a game that will test your powers of concentration. It's called Solitaire."

He explained carefully. This wasn't ordinary Canfield solitaire. It was a better game, less ruled by chance.

"In the first part you need a partner," Grayson said, "al-

though it isn't required. This partner goes through the deck, drawing one card at a time, concentrating on its suit and numerical value, but permitting only the back to be visible to you. Now here is where parapsychology or cryptesthesia comes into play. Some persons call it E. S. P., or Extra Sensory Perception. As the partner concentrates on each card, you attempt to receive his thought wave and "guess" what the card is. In this fashion you divide the deck into four packs of what you assume to be four complete suits. Of course, if you rely on chance alone, the odds against you would be pretty heavy. But since mental action probably sets off a radiation and since your electronic brain has been devised to receive such stimuli, you should do fairly well.

"The rest is simple. Drawing one card at a time from any of the four packs, you form a cross of five cards face up on the table. You play upon this cross in reverse rotation, paying no attention to suit. In other words, on a nine you can play any eight, on a queen any knave. When you have played as far as you can, the next card you draw goes in the corner, thus filling out the cross into a square. Let us suppose this card is a five. Then into each corner must go one of the other

three fives and on these corner cards you build up in regular rotation: six, seven, eight, etc. according to suit.

"The object of the game is to form each corner into a complete run of one suit, but the method is far more than a simple matter of luck. It goes back to E. S. P. and your mental division of the pack by thought-concentration. Is all that clear?"

Rafael nodded and Grayson fancied he saw interest light up that plastic face. They began to play and when the *contrôleur* had gone through the deck for the initial selection, he left the table, crossed to a chair, lit his pipe, and sat down to watch.

It was worth watching. With his head bent slightly forward and his body erect in the chair, the Assistant was the picture of concentration. He formed the cross of five cards. Moving slowly, sluffing off on the discard pile only after long thought, he began to build up three corners. But the fourth corner was stubborn and as the discard pile began to grow, it soon became evident that he was going to lose. At length he swept the cards together impatiently.

"Again!" he said to Grayson.

So again Grayson went through the deck while the Assistant mentally sorted and evaluated them. Rafael was play-

ing hurriedly now, almost as if a high stake had been placed on the game.

For an hour Grayson watched as Rafael lost game after game. The *contrôleur* yawned then and headed for his room. But, halfway, he stopped on impulse and slid into the chair before the radar panel. For several moments he sat there, turning dials and making adjustments. Then he leaned back, a scowl darkening his features.

The screen told a disturbing story. The Venusians were on the move; large parties from three neighboring villages were apparently converging on Village Xanon. And that could mean only one thing: the grievance ceremony, a council held by the men of the tribes to discuss an alleged wrong brought against them by an officer of the government. That's what came of having a mealy-mouthed mechanical parrot for an Assistant.

Grayson shrugged and went to bed.

When he emerged into central quarters the next morning Rafael was still at the table, playing cards. The Earthman smiled crookedly but said nothing.

He went about his duties at the post and in the afternoon set out into the swamp to inspect his traps. He was bending over

one of the snares when a spiked thorn dart whispered by his head and stuck in a nearby tree. In a fury, Grayson wheeled in time to see a Venusian thrust his head above a fern frond, stare at him defiantly and then disappear.

That settled it. It was time to put these damned aliens in their place. Grayson swung into the back trail and headed rapidly for the post. Back at the dome, he went to his room, took down a heat pistol, and flipped the chamber to see that it had a full charge. He dropped it into his pocket and strode into central quarters.

Rafael was seated at the table, playing cards.

Grayson smiled as he observed the partial fruition of his plans. If it were possible for an Epwa to do so, the Assistant already looked wan and haggard. There was a dull reddish glow about his eyes, and his plastic hands as he manipulated the cards, moved nervously and jerkily.

"I'm going to Village Xanon," Grayson said, striding to the door. "You will stay here and take care of the post."

Rafael looked up from the cards.

"Village Xanon is dangerous now, sir," he said. "If I don't hear from you within a reasonable length of time, I'll follow."

"You'll do nothing of the

sort," Grayson said. "You'll stay here and play cards. That's an order."

PARKHURST'S regular inspection visit was three weeks late, and the colonial official was somewhat concerned as he nudged the electric launch to the landing stake at Blue Mold. Brooding silence hung over the post, and no light was visible through the ports of the dome. Parkhurst climbed the veranda steps.

"Halloo!" he called. "Anyone here?"

A darker shadow roused itself from a wing-back chair as Rafael, the Assistant, came forward, switching on a lamp.

"I give you greetings," he said formally. "Grayson has not yet returned."

Parkhurst surveyed Rafael closely. The Epwa, he was glad to see, appeared to be in good shape.

His clothing, although showing signs of wear, was clean and neatly pressed, and his plastic face and hands seemed in perfect condition.

"Well, how've you two been getting on?" Parkhurst queried, lighting a cheroot. "Where is Grayson, by the way?"

"He's at Village Xanon," Rafael replied. "He told me to stay here and play the game."

Parkhurst's eyes lifted. "Game?"

"A game called Solitaire. It is played with these cards."

The colonial official moved across to the table and, while he watched, Rafael swept the deck together and began to explain the game as Grayson had explained it to him. Listening, Parkhurst showed impatience at first; then his brow furrowed in a deep frown.

"Why didn't he send you to Village Xanon?" he asked suddenly.

"Grayson preferred to go himself. He went to see about a grievance council the Venusians are holding."

"Grievance co—"? Alarm sounded in Parkhurst's voice. "Great thunder, what's wrong?"

"I do not know. Except that Grayson struck their chief when he became insubordinate."

Parkhurst slumped slowly into a chair. A muscle quivered on his cheek. "When was he due back?" he demanded hoarsely.

"He has been gone five days. Do you wish to play the game with me?"

Five days! And the fool had struck a chief. Parkhurst turned and stared out into the silent blackness that was the great swamp. Five days! A *contrôleur* had strict orders never, under any circumstances, to remain

away from his post more than forty-eight hours. Suddenly the colonial official's throat went dry, and a feeling of nausea churned his stomach. The cheroot slipped from his fingers to the floor.

With a queer inner horror he realized that Grayson was not going to return.

Parkhurst sat there in a stupor,

cold sweat breaking out upon his body while Rafael continued to babble about the card game. His words seemed to come from far off. Something about the deck Grayson had given him, containing only fifty-one cards, an error which the Epwa had discovered and taken care of soon after the Earthman's departure.

An empty house—for the taking. It sounded too good to be true—and it was.



HOT SQUAT

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

YOU can't blame the Watsons and the Temperleys for what they did, extra-legal though it may have been. Even if you should happen to possess one of those uncomfortably legalistic minds it will be hard for you to disapprove. For there was precedent a-plenty. Throughout the length and breadth of England there was precedent. Every morning the paper carried stories of the descent of home-hungry

squatters upon derelict camps, upon groups of huts that had once housed the minions of the War Office or the Royal Air Force but that now, save for the minor matter of legality, were ready and waiting for the first comers.

At first Watson had been inclined to disapprove. He was—or had been—an officer. The wavy red and white stripes on his R.N.V.R. tie were still bright

and unsoiled. He had not been out of the service long enough for him to have lost the slightly idolatrous respect for duly constituted authority. With Bill Temperley it was different. He had been a bomber pilot. Authority or no authority, it is hard to retain any great regard for property, private or state owned, when you have spent the past two or three years blowing it up or knocking it down.

But it was Watson who had the idea.

He met Temperley at the usual time in the Saloon Bar of the Dog and Duck. He hardly waited for the drinks to be set in front of them before he broached what was on his mind.

"Bill," he demanded eagerly, holding his pint mug a little aslant so that a cascade of weak beer splashed to the floor, "Bill! Who *does* own that rather classy hut out on the waste ground by Canning Wood?"

Temperley sipped his own beer thoughtfully. He knew what was coming. Jane had told Ruth, his wife, something of the strained relations in the Kent household. It wasn't so much a case of two women in the same kitchen as of two men in the same living room. Jim Watson and old Kent, his father-in-law, were incompatibles. One — the younger — was well to the left of center in pol-

itics and not a little artistic. The other was a pillar of what Watson would, undoubtedly, call the *petit bourgeoisie* — the class that, as Watson was so fond of declaiming, has put Britain where she is today — on the skids.

He looked at his friend and grinned.

"Cheer up!" he said. "I'm as badly off as you are. When I get in tonight my beloved Ma-in-law will smell my vinous breath and snort her disgust...."

"You aren't as badly off!" Watson almost shouted. "You and Ruth can at least have a little privacy in your own bedroom, if nowhere else. You haven't a child. That's why we *must* get a place of our own somehow. I don't want young Alan to be brought up in this atmosphere of what are, to our sort of people, utterly alien ideas."

"That's what I told 'em tonight," he continued. "I told 'em that I might as well be living among the natives of an alien planet. And it's true. They just aren't our sort of people. Their minds don't work the same as ours. If they have minds. . . ." he concluded bitterly.

"But after all, Jim," Temperley pointed out, "you must remember that it's their house. . . ."

"Yes," flared the other. "*Their* house and *their* daughter. That's the worst part of it. She'd started

taking their side far too much. Marriage may be a fine institution—but not when it boils down to keeping another man's daughter...."

He finished his beer. He rapped loudly on the counter with his mug to attract the barmaid's attention. He said, absently, "Same again, please." Then—"Who *does* own that hut?"

"Not so loud . . ." counselled the ex-pilot. "There're plenty in here like ourselves—who'd sell their immortal souls for any shack with four walls and a roof that they could call their own. I know why you want to know—and you've given me the same idea. It should hold the four of us—five with young Alan—comfortably...."

"But who . . . ?"

"Search me. You know as much as I do. There's a barbed wire fence with a padlocked gate, and a notice board with a broad arrow and the mystic letters *R P L M*, and the not so mystic words—*KEEP OUT*. I've been past it sometimes, when I've been on leave, and there's been a sentry there. I just can't recall what uniform he was wearing—but it was something like army battle dress. And I was past the place this very morning on my rounds. There was no sentry there. It seems to be deserted."

"It *must* be deserted," declared

Watson eagerly. "What time were you past? Eleven o'clock? Well, I took a stroll that way at about half past four this afternoon, and there wasn't a soul there. I had a look at the padlock on the gate. It's a Woolworth effort—a couple of smart blows should fix it."

Temperley ordered more beer. When it was brought, and when they had both lifted their mugs, he clinked the rim of his against Watson's. He said softly, "Here's to tomorrow night!"

"Tomorrow night, Bill? What . . . ?"

"Yes, tomorrow night. I'd say do it tonight—but these things require a spot of organising. We daren't leave it later than tomorrow—we aren't the only two families in this God-forsaken town on the lookout for such a desirable property. Yes—we're shifting in too. There'll be room for five. And, if it comes to a showdown we can lend each other moral support.

"But it'll be your job to talk Jane round. You'll have all day to do it in—you haven't finished your leave yet. And when we call for you in the car have young Alan ready, and your bedding, and a few odds and ends for cooking and such. I'll be round at seven-thirty sharp."

"Seven-thirty-sharp," repeated the ex-sailor. "We'll be ready and

waiting," He raised his glass. His voice was that of a schoolboy planning some deliciously irregular adventure. "To Operation Squat!" he said softly.

It was almost dark when Temperley stopped his battered old car outside the Kent's front gate. Ruth was with him in the front seat. As her husband sounded his horn she told him, raising her voice to be heard above the raucous noise: "Jane won't be happy about this, Bill. She's always regarded this place as her home. She just can't understand why Jim can't fit in."

"Well, he can't. And I don't blame him, either. There's nothing worse than living among people with whom you have nothing in common. It was bad enough even in a rear echelon hut in Korea—but we were at least all doing the same job. We could always talk shop...."

A light came on in the hall. The front door opened. Watson came out first, lugging a heavy suitcase. He staggered with it to the Temperley car, managed to fit it among the Temperley chattels already in the luggage compartment. He said, "There's more to come, Bill. But we shan't be long."

He came out again, with what looked like three folded camp beds. They had to go in the back

of the car. When he came out the third time Jane and Alan were with him. The child was saying, over and over, "But I want to stay with my grandaddy." Jane, tight-lipped, said nothing. She dumped a collection of utensils into the back of the car with a clatter. Old Kent came and stood in the lighted doorway. He, too, was silent. And Temperley looked at the stocky, motionless figure and wondered whethered it was disapproval that he was feeling, or just relief.

Temperley said: "Ruth, you sit in the back with Jane and Alan. Come in here with me, Bill."

And Alan started to cry — "Mummy, mummy! Why can't we stay with grandaddy?"

And Jane, bitterly reasonable, replied—"Because, darling, your father says that he can't bear living among *aliens*!"

Watson, who had seated himself beside the ex-pilot, started up in a flaring rage. His face was white with passion. He shouted:

"If you have anything to say, say it to me direct. Don't go sneaking about me to the child. Have you no bloody idea of discipline?"

His wife shook off Ruth's restraining hands. She leaned over into the front of the car and whispered intensely: "Don't

swear at me. I tell you, don't swear at me. Or..."

"Or you'll go back to your dear parents? Much more of this carry on and they'll be welcome to you. And they can keep you."

Temperley became suddenly aware that the old man was standing on the pavement beside the car. He was saying: "Jane, Jane! You'll be much happier at home than in that old army hut!"

Watson heard him at about the same time. "Keep your nose out of this, you old fool!" he shouted. "If I ever set foot in your house again it'll be in a coffin!"

The airman pressed the button of his self starter. The batteries were fully charged. He let in his clutch and jerked the vehicle and its occupants away from what promised to be a first-class family quarrel. The impetus of his starting threw Jane back into her seat. Beside him, Watson was cursing under his breath. And in the back Jane was sobbing quietly, and young Alan was bawling his head off, and Ruth was frantically trying to comfort them both.

Temperley started to laugh.

"And what's so funny?" demanded his friend.

"You. If I ever set foot in your house again *it will be in a coffin!* And you call yourself a writer of rich, beautiful prose!"

But nobody else was amused. And the rest of the drive was made in sullen silence, broken only by sniffings and low-voiced whisperings from the back seat.

"Well, there are no lights," said Temperley cheerfully.

"No. Looks hopeful. Got the hammer?"

"Yes. Hell! This lock is tough!"

Watson left his friend to struggle with the padlock. He looked at the notice board beside the gate, at the mystic letters and the broad arrow. He looked at the words: KEEP OUT. They meant less now than they had ever done. He would never go back to his in-laws after that scene. He would sooner sleep in a haystack. It started to rain. Yes, even in this weather he would sooner sleep in a haystack.

On the other side of the gate, past the barbed-wire fence, loomed the hut. It was large. It gleamed dully in the light of the car's head-lamps. It conveyed a vague impression of streamlining, looked almost like a huge trailer caravan without the wheels. There were windows, but they were circular, like a ship's ports. And the whole affair gave the idea of permanency and strength. Beside the average Nissen hut—or even a pre-fab—it would be a palace.

"Ruth!" Temperley was calling. "Pass me out the screwdriver!" Then—"Hi, Jim! Lend a hand, will you?"

The ex-pilot had abandoned his attack on the padlock. He had transferred his attention to the hinges of the gate. They did not put up much of a fight. Then the two men lifted the framework of wood and barbed wire clear of the ground, swung it out and round on its padlock. Watson cursed as a sharp barb of the wire tore his sleeve. He began to tug the gate viciously. "Careful, Jim," warned Temperley. "We don't want to do any unnecessary damage!"

"The bloody thing has damaged me!" growled the other.

"There! Will you drive through, Ruth?"

The car started. It rolled forward over the wet, grass-grown road. It cleared the gate-posts comfortably. It came to a stop with the glare of its lights full on a square door in the side of the hut. Temperley ran forward. "Damn! It's locked!" he cried. "And I can't find a handle or keyhole."

"Let me see," said Watson. He inspected the door carefully. It was flush with the curved walls of the hut. He ran his fingers over the smooth surface. And he was more surprised than Temperley when, without warn-

ing, the door slid to one side. "I don't know who this outfit is," he admitted, "but they do themselves well!"

On the other side of the door was a little hallway with another door, opposite to the one by which the two men had entered. This had a catch, of sorts. It was a button, not concealed, inviting the inquisitive finger. Temperley pressed it. The inner door slid open. And on the wall, just inside it, was a row of studs. When one of these was pushed the interior of the hut, as far as they could see, became suffused with a dim, indirect light.

"So," said Temperley. "These laddies did themselves well, I wish they'd got 'em to build the huts for *our* camps. Look at those cushions! Why—they must have lolled around like bleeding Romans!"

"Yes. Their lights could be a bit brighter, though. We'll have to get some of our own in, tomorrow." He turned to the open doors. "Jane! Alan! Ruth! Come on in! It's splendid!"

The women and the small boy got out of the car and splashed through the puddles that had already gathered outside the hut. They were impressed. Even Jane was impressed. Her face, that had been sullen, brightened. She set Alan down on a pile of the soft cushions, where he went to

sleep almost at once. "But this is splendid!" she cried. "It's clean!" Then, somberly—"But they'll never let us keep it. . . ."

"Once we're here they'll have no choice!" retorted her husband. "But let's look at the other rooms. There's bound to be a galley or kitchen or something somewhere!"

There was. It was labor-saving beyond the dreams of the most optimistic housewife. There must have been food there too—but if there was it was in the cupboards, the doors of which—set flush with the walls—they could not open. But it did not matter. They had brought food with them. And there was water, hot and cold, and there was an oven that jumped to a scorching heat almost as soon as the button on its side was pressed. It seemed strange that the unknown designer had made his equipment to suit the convenience of cooks of far more than average height. But even that, Jane pointed out, was better than having to stoop all the time.

Watson stayed in the kitchen with the two women. He had always been interested in household devices. And he was hoping, by sharing her obvious enthusiasm, to woo his wife away from any regrets she might still have for having left her home. Temperley wandered off some-

where by himself. "I hope he's found it," said Watson, noting his absence. "If there isn't one it'd spoil the whole show. . . ."

"Look at this!" enthused Jane. "But I wonder what they use it for. . . ."

Her husband wasn't looking. He was staring at the door. He was staring at his friend who, his face unnaturally grave, was making beckoning motions. He left the two wives to their joyful discoveries and slipped quietly out of the kitchen.

The ex-pilot said: "Bill! We can't stay here!"

"And why not? The place is deserted. We've got squatters' rights. We've got public opinion behind us if not the law."

"Come with me."

Watson followed the other along a passage. There were doors on either side, some of them open. But these the airman ignored. He hurried the sailor along to the end of the passage, into the last room of all. It must have been right at the end of the hut.

Watson gasped. This was no living room. It was not even an office. It was packed full of apparatus and instruments—all four walls and even the ceiling. Some of the gear was familiar. There were obvious oscilloscopes. And there were the staring, white clock-faces of gauges. Watson

looked more closely. The symbols on them were strange.

He said: "So this is some kind of a radar installation. So what? Apparently, nobody needs it."

"There's radar here, Bill—or something like it! But there's more here than radar. *They*—used it, of course. It was just one of their instruments. But what do you make of this?"

This was a deep, heavily padded chair. Whoever sat in it would have before him switches and levers—and something like the keyboard of an oversized typewriter. But that wasn't all. The ex-pilot picked up the end of a band of leatherlike fabric. It had a clasp of sorts. And the other end was made fast to the side of the chair.

"Radar!" gritted Temperley. "Yes—and more. Do you know what *this* is? No—you wouldn't. You don't use 'em in the Navy. But it's a safety belt. Now do you see?"

Watson saw. And he saw why so much of the hut had impressed him with its strangeness—and why so much had exuded a haunting air of familiarity. It was the feel of a ship that had welcomed him when he first entered—the indefinable atmosphere that is part of all vessels, whether of the sea, the air or . . .

Or . . .

There was a loud scream from the kitchen.

Both men turned and ran for the door. They reached it simultaneously. For long seconds they struggled there, foolishly—and then Temperley wisely gave ground and let his friend out first.

Alan was in the little cooking compartment when they got there. And so was Jane. And Ruth. And they were all staring at the figure of a man—tall and thin and stooped, standing in the open doorway. He held in his hand a large, wicked-looking pistol.

"Put that down!" roared Temperley.

He sprang at the armed man, clutched at the hand holding the weapon. But the other was too quick. His body seemed to twist from the hips bonelessly; the pistol fired when the airman was still poised for his leap. There was no report. There was only an intolerably bright, soundless flash.

There was only a soundless flash—and a crumpled figure on the floor whose clothes were still smouldering, and the acrid bite of ozone, and the sickly stench of burned flesh.

Ruth screamed. Her fingers curved into claws. In her face, in her eyes, was no grief. That would come later. All that was

there now was the desire to rend and tear.

But the soundless flash was faster than she could ever be.

And Watson, who could have disarmed the murderer while his friend's wife was killed, was being noisily sick over the hitherto spotless plastic flooring.

"Stand over there," said the man with the gun. "Yes, there. With your wife and child."

There was no especial characteristic about that voice—except, perhaps, the extraordinary ordinariness. And that seemed to be the keynote of the whole personality. The battledress uniform was ordinary. The face, the forage cap above it, were ordinary. The height was greater than the average—but the stoop with which the murderer carried himself counteracted this.

Behind him Watson could see figures similar to that of his captor hurrying along the passage-way. Some were unburdened, some carried heavy cases.

He turned his head and looked at Jane. Her face was white and set. Alan, whimpering a little, was clutching her skirts. His mother held him pressed tight to her so that he should not see the sprawled bodies of Temperley and Ruth.

A low humming sound started, shrilled into a whine. The lights

flickered slightly. The floor seemed to lift under their feet. The man with the gun relaxed.

"Our reconnaissance is over," he said. "And so is the need for disguise. But how easy it all was! Just uniforms and notice-boards in your uniform and notice-board ridden world—and nobody suspected us! There was, too, the minor matter of what you call 'papers'—but our psychologist soon turned out a set that, with the necessary language changes, would pass us in any country of your planet...."

The hand holding the pistol did not waver. But another right arm appeared from somewhere under the battle-dress blouse. It and the disengaged left hand went up to the head, as though to lift off the forage cap. But more than the cap was lifted. The two hands—left and unnatural right—made a twisting motion. And the whole head turned—front to back and back to the front again.

But it wasn't a real head. It was only a sort of combination mask and helmet. What was underneath it was a featureless, blobby mass. And it had eyes on stalks. And tendrils. And it was green.

No sound came from the real head. But the mask-helmet, swinging negligently from the extra right hand, carried on the

conversation in its too ordinary voice.

"... and so we have all the data we want. About your social systems, your natural resources, your weapons. Especially your weapons. . . All that we wanted at the end was specimens—alive and dead. And our psychologist told us that all we had to do was to give the ship the appearance of being deserted—and the specimens would come to us. . . ."

The faint, drumming vibration that had accompanied the whine of the engines had now ceased.

Watson realised vaguely that this vibration had been caused by the ship's passage through the atmosphere. Now there was no atmosphere. They were in airless space.

But Jane had started to laugh. She ignored Alan, who was whimpering loudly, and turned on her husband and laughed in his face. Some of it may have been hysteria — but not all. And—

"You fool!" she cried. "You damned, clever, conceited fool! Now how are you going to like living among aliens?"

Dere Sir: "What Did You Do to the Moon?"

Astronomers may not get much fan mail, but what they get is sometimes startling. A famous scientist gives some examples of improbable—but true—correspondence.

By DR. ROBERT S. RICHARDSON

THAT stars of the stage, screen, TV and radio receive fan mail in large quantities is taken as a matter of course, but it may come as a surprise to many people to hear that we astronomers have our public, too. It is true that our correspondence may not bulk quite so large as Lana Turner's or Bob Hope's. Yet over a period of time the number of letters received by certain members of the profession would make an impressive total. On one point, however, I refuse to concede any odds. I am willing to bet that there is no one whose fan mail has a higher screwball content than ours. For some reason, astronomy has a morbid fascination for all the nuts in the country.

One is often left with the feeling that a considerable proportion of the population belongs to what Theodore Roosevelt called the "lunatic fringe," a group

consisting of emotionally unstable people beset by vague doubts and fears, who become hysterical or panicky at the slightest provocation. About a year ago the rumor spread that a new planet, that instead of being round was *square* had been discovered with the 200-inch telescope. (The rumor was ultimately traced to a member of the Four Square Gospel Church, an organization founded by the late Aimee Semple Macpherson.) The fact that this alleged planet was shaped like a cube instead of a sphere seemed to be the sign that many people had long been awaiting. It was in vain that the secretary of the Mount Wilson and Palomar Observatories denied the report. People went right ahead insisting that we had discovered a cubical planet. Nothing that we could do made the slightest difference.

About fifteen years ago I pub-

lished a paper describing a relation between the sudden appearance of brilliant clouds of hydrogen gas over sunspots with fade-outs of high frequency radio transmission on the Earth. It happened to be the kind of paper that makes a good newspaper story, with the result that the Associated Press broadcast it over the country. I was young then and cherished the illusion that possibly the intelligent upper crust among the population might find my researches of interest. I had also assumed that the effect was of a type hitherto unrecognized in astrophysics. In a few days I discovered how very wrong I was. Letters began coming in all the way from San Diego to Nova Scotia that sounded as if they must have been written by people who were either already crazy or else well on their way toward insanity. It seemed that these people had made the identical discovery years ago, and were furious over the fact that I was now trying to claim it as my own. What did I mean trying to steal their stuff? Who the devil did I think I was anyhow?

Some of these letters, that come to every large observatory, are amusing, others are irritating, and some are completely incomprehensible. Here are a few specimens taken from the files of the

Mount Wilson and Palomar Observatories. Now, we try to answer all letters conscientiously to the best of our ability. If you write us a sensible letter asking for information I can guarantee that sooner or later you will receive a reply. But suppose that you were the one who had the responsibility of answering these communications. How would you reply? They are given here exactly as written except that some of them are considerably abridged.

Here is a telegram that came addressed to a geophysicist from Washington, D. C., who spent some months at the Mount Wilson Observatory engaged in lunar research. It consisted of this single line: WHAT DID YOU DO TO THE MOON IT HASNT BEEN VISIBLE SINCE YOU LEFT HERE.

The letter below was written on the back of an invoice by a man who modestly signed himself as "Discoverer of a Greater Discovery than the World has ever before known, and Governor and Governor over the aforesaid discovery." It reads in part,

"Dear Sirs: Who would have ever thought that Observatories would ever degenerate into: nothing but a Racket?

"Current Astronomy is Rot.

"Einstein Relativity is Rot.

"Speed of light is Rot.

"For all the good that observatories are doing today; or other ways, they are more than undoing it.

Yours truly, etc."

We also receive helpful suggestions on ways to use the telescopes to greatest advantage, as shown here.

"Gentlemen: Why don't you use those powerful, new rays, aiding vision but not killing, directed to the surface of a planet, lighting up an acre, more or less, and shifting about. Then with your giant reflector, read the story of Mars and also study cell-division (Nuclei) of the nebula and the diffused cells in the rings of Saturn.

With apology,
H. R. H.
(Farmer-Scientist)

Here is a plea for help from a man in Nova Scotia.

"official tender
"to the observatory carnegie institution of Washington, D. C. is that seven million dollar county hospital completed ready for use will there be work for me along with the doctors or something else that i wont have to kill myself working in coming over as soon as I get money enough for my ticket on the railroad. are they any money for me in south America see if you can get some and set it to me

havent i any money any where that i can have for myself to use there must bee some i mean not working for it somebody should give me some, etc, etc, etc."

Professor Einstein's visit to Pasadena in the winter of 1931 naturally aroused widespread interest. Here are some remarks that came to the observatory written on the back of a picture of Santa Claus.

"Mr. Wilson

"Please show Mr. Einstein your big telescope so he can tell us all about it. He has no big telescope you know but we know he is a big scientific man in education. He is considered even greater than Chrey Chaplin. Huray Huray."

A Japanese wrote this letter to the late Dr. George Ellery Hale, formerly director of the Mount Wilson Observatory:

"Wilson Astronomical
Observatory
State of California

"Gentlemen: I beg respectfully to inform you that kindly report me 'Professor Hayle or Haile' (on the pronunciation) who is the Principal of the *Sun Rays* Study Institution (may different name with the same work) is stay in your Office at present or not.

"I know well that, you are very busy in your Office at every day, but I like to receive your

sincerely favour and kindness for my heartily inquire, I am so glad that, you will execute my requirement at your convenience, but if you can, I like for you to make up for me with your first chance.

"Thanking advance and waiting the satisfactory answer by return mail if you can and obliged,

Sincerely yours,
J. S. K.

P.S. Enclosed two cents postage
for the mail of your answer."

The preceding letters are fairly rational compared with this one, which, up to date, no one on the staff has ever been able to decipher. See if you can figure it out.

"All branches of absent treatment through the mental airways in the abstract with applied phenomena must be checked up on irrespective of what name or alibi the process operate under for the real danger lies in the abstract with applied phenomena because the process itself is an invisible contact with mentality in the effects only are seen which leaves individual liberty of mentality and fought at the mercy of applied phenomena I am not swimming or theorysing."

Missing Link

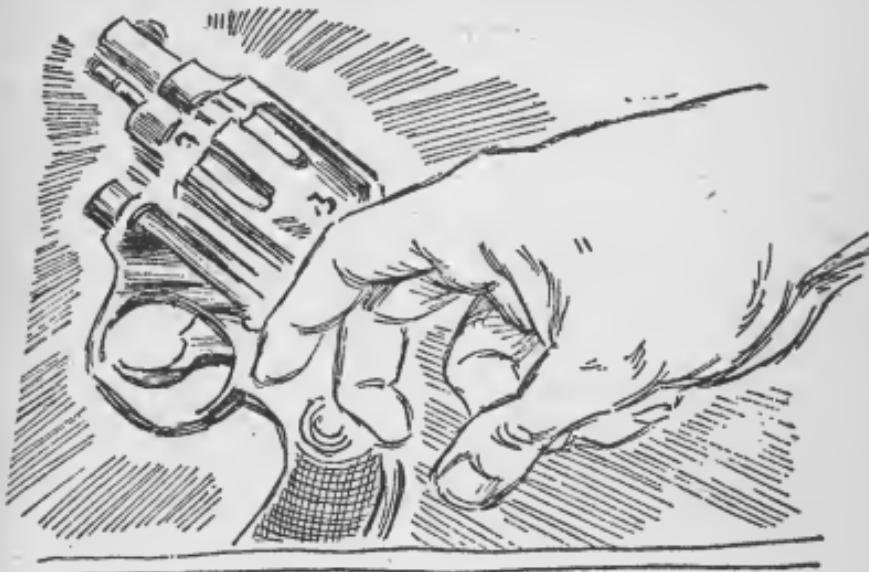
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'These few examples should be

sufficient to convey a general idea of this type of correspondence. There is a remarkable sameness about all the letters. Undoubtedly many of these writers are paranoiacs suffering from delusions of grandeur, in which case attempting to point out the inconsistencies in their letters would only aggravate their condition. In so many cases they claim to have discovered the principle underlying the law of gravitation, the fundamental nature of light and electricity, etc. A certain member of the staff once had two of these masterminds writing him, each asserting that he alone had solved the riddle of the universe and denouncing anyone who dared question his assertions. They usually ended their letters with a request for information that took hours to dig out of the library. He finally obtained peace by sicking them onto each other. They are probably at each other's throats to this day.

I think some sort of award though, should go to the lady who wrote to the California Institute of Technology inquiring about the Christmas play they were going to present. She wanted to know if it were true that the scientists were planning to use *real angels* in the cast? If so, would they please send her a ticket?

Ernie liked to kill people. The trouble was, his gun didn't—and his gun was going to do something about it.



WITH INTENT TO KILL

By JOHN JAKES

ERNIE COLE frowned over the newspaper.

He didn't like what was printed on the front page. The new district attorney had started a campaign against the gamblers in the city, and all the other

kinds of assorted vice that went along with them.

But especially Ernie didn't like the part about the check-up on guns. Too many unregistered weapons were floating around, and too many people were get-

ting killed with them. All citizens were urged to report any knowledge they might have concerning persons with concealed firearms.

Ernie rubbed his unshaven face. He'd have to watch out. The police could hook him from two angles. The less troublesome of the two was the gun. The other was his connection with the gambling interests.

He suddenly became aware that the telephone was ringing.

Answer it, Ernie. You'd better answer it. Maybe it's one of your friends. Maybe they've got some more work for you. And me. Maybe they want you to fill me up again with six new bullets and maybe they want you to empty me into some poor idiot like you've done so many times. Damn you....

Ernie got up from the dirty easy-chair, putting out his cigarette in the glass ashtray shaped like a naked woman. He picked up the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Ernie?"

"That's right."

"This is Jimmie."

"Jimmie! Christ . . ." Ernie said worriedly, "I read the papers about the D.A. clamping down. . . ."

"Keep your mouth closed, will you?" Palo Alto Jimmie, the gambler, said flatly. "Listen, and

don't answer me back. There's another . . . business deal." He emphasized the last two words. "I'm only going to say it once."

"Go ahead," Ernie replied uneasily. He didn't like the idea of another job when the police were tightening up, but then, he could use the money. Funds right now were running a little low.

"The name is Belnik," Palo Alto Jimmie said softly. "He has not paid one of his debts, and he told me last night he wasn't going to pay it. I want you to collect in the usual way. You'll get the money in the mail tomorrow." The voice hardened. "I want to teach these wise boys. I want to teach them they can't play around. You collect tonight. Belnik gets home around six. Here's the address . . ."

After a while Ernie said anxiously, "Yeah, sure, I got it."

"All right," said Palo Alto Jimmie the gambler.

The phone clicked down at the other end.

Nervously Ernie jabbed another cigarette in his mouth and walked across the little room to the dingy dresser. He pulled open the top drawer.

Lying inside on a soft rag, was a shining revolver, oiled and glistening blue. Ernie carefully put on a pair of worn leather gloves, took out the gun and filled the chamber with six bul-

lets from a frayed pasteboard box.

He clicked the chamber shut and looked at the gun. It was a good gun. He had been smart, buying it from Nelson the Turk three years ago in Detroit. The gun had never given him trouble, like it could have. Never jammed, when jamming could have meant the difference between escaping and being caught to die or go to prison. Funny he'd never really thought of that before.

Ernie smiled over his chipped shards of teeth.

It was a nice little gun, all right.

As he went out that evening, old Mrs. Watrous, the landlady, peered at him from her front door, running her thick tongue across her hairy upper lip. Ernie hurried on. She looked like she was thinking about something nasty.

The collection, as usual, was simple.

He waited in the shadows of the small frame house while the wind soughed along through the darkening trees and occasional cars crept along the street. At two minutes after six, a small maroon coupe pulled up to the curb, and a man climbed out.

Ernie eased the gun from his pocket, his gloved hand steady on the butt.

The man whose name was Ra-

fael Belnik was moving up the sidewalk, evening newspaper under his arm, a smile of anticipation at coming home on his thick, dark features. Those were the kind, Ernie thought. Play around with boys like Jimmie for kicks. Probably thinks Jimmie is a kidder. Big laugh.

Ernie pulled the trigger, emptying the gun.

Belnik looked puzzled, took a step and fell. A pool, black in the twilight, formed slowly under him. Somewhere inside the house a woman howled in terror.

But Ernie was already gone.

He caught a bus uptown to his rooming house. There, he cleaned the gun and, with an affectionate pat, stored it away in the drawer. Then he went to bed, not so uneasy any more. After all, a clear two hundred bucks was on the way.

It was a nice little gun, all right.

Well, it's all over now and here I am back in the drawer. And that Belnik. Just like the others. Amazed looks on their faces. Amazed that they could die. People always look that way when they get shot. I wonder if you, Ernie . . . no, that's a crazy idea. Killing you. Killing. I ought to know about killing. I've done enough of it. How I hate it, really! If only someone else had bought me. If the police

ever get me, I'm finished. They'll take me apart and examine me and I'll never be the same again. Why do things have to work out this way, Ernie? I hate you. Do you know that? I hate you. I hate you for buying me. I wish you were dead. I wish I could kill you. I wish . . . stop! What? Yes, I remember! If only I could pay you back! Perhaps if I only had a chance.

I've never even considered it before. But just a chance. . . . I'll have to wait. How do you like that, Ernie? Did you hear me, Ernie? I'll be waiting.

Two mornings later, Ernie read the newspaper again.

There was a story about a corpse named Rafael Belnik. And another story. Ernie swore, afraid. The cops had broken into the Damascus Club and chopped it to pieces with their axes. The crooked wheels were smashed, the stacked card tables turned over. And Palo Alto Jimmie was facing indictment.

If he spills it, Ernie thought frantically, he'll get off easy. And when he spills it, I'll be one of them to catch it.

He stumbled up out of his chair. He had to pack, leave town, get a bus or train and hide himself in another city, in darkness for a while. Perhaps the police were already on their way . . .

"You're the lady that called us?" Sergeant Truex said, pushing back a yawn.

"That's right, officer," Mrs. Watrous said loudly. "When I read in the paper . . ."

"Where's the guy's apartment?"

"Second from the head of the stairs."

"You sure you seen the gun?" asked Foy, the other policeman.

"Oh, yes!" The landlady's eyes widened and she became highly confidential. "I've always thought he looked suspicious, so I went into his room with a passkey yesterday. The gun was there all right, in the top drawer of the dresser."

"Oh well," Truex grumbled, "let's get it over with."

Foy slapped his holster as they climbed the stairs. "The cop's life. Plenty of fast action, like the movies. Dragging in every cheap hood and checking on his hardware. Hell!"

They approached the door. Truex knocked.

"What is it?" a man's voice said. The door opened just a crack.

Ernie saw the two cops and he yelled, trying to slam the door shut and lock it. Truex shoved the door, hard. It bounded open, throwing Ernie across the room.

"Listen, buddy. . . ." Foy began.

"He shot his mouth off!" Ernie shouted, a picture of cornered fear. "He shot his goddam mouth off . . ."

"Listen, buddy," Foy said again.

Ernie swore and jumped for the dresser. He yanked open the top drawer and pulled out the gun.

"By God!" Truex yelled.

"You won't stick me with him!" Ernie shouted, levelling the gun at Truex.

"Watch it, Gene," Foy cried his hand dropping to his revolver. Ernie, he saw, meant to kill them.

Down swept Foy's hand, and up. There was very little time. In an instant Ernie's gun would bloom at Truex, who was trying to dodge and pull his own gun free.

"All right!" Ernie howled crazily. His finger quivered, jerking the trigger.

There was a split instant of silence.

Ernie looked at the shining blue gun, amazed horror in his eyes. "It's jammed," he screamed, "it ja . . ."

The slugs from Sergeant Foy's gun tore through him, ripping his insides, whirling him and throwing him down and far out into darkness. . . .

Truex shook his head as he took a drink of the whisky. "Boy, I need this." He sighed and continued, "I still don't understand it."

"He yelled something," Foy said, "about somebody shooting his mouth off. Maybe there was a tie-up."

"To what?"

Foy grinned and shrugged. "God knows."

"He was nuts," Truex said flatly. "When an old lady says he's got a gun and we come to check up on registry, he starts blasting. There must be more to it, or he's nuts. Hell, I just don't get it."

Foy grinned wryly. "We won't ever get it. We haven't got good enough jobs."

Truex laughed. "What ever happened to the gun?"

Foy gestured carelessly. "In the lab . . ."

It is very light in here. White light, steady and strong. But it has a clean smell about it. They're coming to examine me, do things to me, check me. I will probably not be the same again. But there is no more Ernie Cole. That's all that counts. I fixed him. The door's opening. A man is coming over. It's worth it. Ernie is dead. They're going to rip me in pieces. I don't mind.

The Editors are proud to present this First Earth Publication
of an all-time Solar System favorite by a noted Martian author.



TERRAN MENACE

By N. R.

FROM Interplanetary Quest by Dr. B. R. Mathewson: Baler House Press, New York, 2195: "Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Martio-Terran relationships in the beginning was the mutual discovery of cultures which were at the same time alike and alien to each other. Both planets eagerly exchanged scientists, philosophers, historians, journalists. With undaunting persistence fired by avid curiosity, they set about the tre-

mendous task of educating Martians and Terrans both to the concept of interplanetary tolerance.

"Doubtless one of the most important factors in breeding a tolerant attitude toward Martians among the people of Earth was the reprinting of a Martian science-fiction story in Terran magazines. The story was discovered in the Martian publication Daos eg Loets (*This title is freely translated to mean Suns*

and Stars. See discussion of Martian semantics in Section XXXII). It is crudely written, yet exhibits a youthful force which transcends the limiting confines of strict grammatical structure. And, above all, it presents an imaginative Martian's concept of Earth, however erroneous that concept may be.

"Because of the part it played in cementing Martio-Terran relations, we reprint it here as it first appeared on this planet, translated from the Lower Martian."

To bury D. J. was the first. And then to fix the tube that had taken from D. J. his life. Scorching, searing, burning. D. J. dead now (rest his spirit well, Phobos), and ready for the ground now (rest his lifeless soulcase in peace, Deimos).

R. N. dug in the cold green ground, dug with spade, dug deep. Above and over, in the pale sky, the sun orange-disc-like glared down. He buried D. J. deep, covered the lifeless form with green ground, touched his forehead in the sacred sign. Then examining the twisted tube.

Metal for the mangled jet would be needed. Metal to repair. Tools were in the ship. The first ship to reach Earth. The thought galled. D. J. dead. A friend, a shipmate. Dead. Never

to know the thrill of discovery. Earth.

Darkness crept into the crevices on the green ground. Twenty-two hours and eighteen minutes, the scientists had said. They knew much about Earth. This was the length of the Earth day, with the year being approximately half that of a Marsyear: three hundred and thirty-seven days.

Life? Perhaps, yes. Perhaps in the great seas that covered the planet, they had said. R. N. looked about him. Plant life, surely. In abundance. Insects, too, yes. But humans? Humanoids? Intelligent life?

Perhaps. The temperature was warmer than that of Mars. The scientists had known this. Earth was the third planet. 89,000,000 miles close to the sun, they had estimated. Closer than Mars, therefore hotter than Mars. But not unbearable, no. And the atmosphere was breathable, heavy but breathable.

Beginning to walk. Pushed his way through the lush violet undergrowth, pistol in hand.

R. N. would need hard metal for the tube. His eyes covered the ground. Outcroppings of worthless, gleaming gold. Soft. Useless. Pretty strains of quartz. Useless.

He grew tired, sat down to rest near a great pointed boulder.

And suddenly the green things

were all around him, wielding weapons with short snouts and long barrels, weapons that mutely menaced.

Eyes enormous, egg-like. Grinning gashes mouthing monosyllables. Noseflaps flaring, hog-fat fingers firm.

(*The preceding paragraph is an example of Martian descriptive alliteration, originated by Z. D. II and crudely imitated here by the author of this story.*)

Eight fingers on each hand, hair-covered. Green in color, short in stature, three feet high, grinning with evil intent. Weapons lifted, ready. R. N. leaped to his feet. His pistol was kicked from his fist. He scrabbled for it in the green dust, his fingers outstretched. A heavy, toeless foot stamped on his hand. He yanked it back in pain.

"Come with us," one of the green creatures said.

R. N.'s eyes widened.

"Do not be surprised," the creature said. "We speak your language because we scanned you, established your thought-speech pattern."

R. N. said nothing. He followed the two in front, hemmed in by three of the creatures behind. They walked, passing other creatures. The females had breasts cupped in material. The males leading him whistled when a female passed or made cluck-

ing sounds. R. N. stared at the curled hairs atop the female heads, at the brightly painted lips, raw yellow against the green of their flesh.

Suddenly, his thoughts to L. E. went. When had he seen her last? What was she doing now? He remembered the plushy redness of her lips, remembered the long polar cap vacation.

(A long passage is deleted from the manuscript at this point. The passage graphically describes the emotional debauchery of the polar cap "vacation," and was apparently aimed at a somewhat salacious Martian audience. The cover of Daos eg Loers, for example, pictured a nude, full-blown Martian female being pursued by a gigantic metallic monster. While the treatment in this passage reveals a trend in Martian literary tastes of this period, its insertion here was deemed unenlightening and therefore inadvisable.)

One of the green creatures entered a white dome while R. N. waited outside with his captors. Busily, his mind considered escape plans. Soon the creature emerged and beckoned for R. N. to follow. R. N. entered the large white dome, which resembled a half-submerged snowball in the green ground.

Two female creatures sat at a

a small table. One was obviously old, the other in the early part of her life.

"Is this the Martian, Gar Dano?" the old one asked one of the green creatures.

"Yes, mother," Gar Dano answered.

"He is too big," she replied.

The young female creature smiled, green dripping from her yellow-painted lips. "I do not think he is too big."

R.N. shuddered at the lustful look in her egg-eyes. She drew a deep breath, her breasts straining at the flimsy cloth cups. She put one hand on her fleshy hip, examined R.N. carefully.

"He is too big," the old one repeated firmly.

"Perhaps for auction," Gar Dano suggested.

"Perhaps," the old one agreed. She glanced sharply at the young female. "Stop thinking of the Martian, Troo Lada. He may bring something at auction. Kudos knows we can use it."

The young female puckered her garish lips petulantly.

Gar Dano held up his eight-fingered hand politely. "Mother, should we tell the Rulers?"

The old one considered this. R.N. waiting breathlessly. The breathing of the rest behind him. "Yes. Go tell them. I will explain the auction to the poor creature."

Gar Dano left. The young female moved closer to R.N., eyelashes fluttering up at him.

"Sit down, Troo Lada," the old one commanded. She turned to R.N.

(*Another Martian literary device comes into play here, and it is best to describe it in advance, as it can easily lead to confusion. The word "imagilogues" has been coined to express this unique art form. In essence, the form makes use of only one literary technique: dialogue. But coupled with this is a series of blank spaces. These spaces are inserted at intervals between the lines of dialogue, or occasionally within a single line of dialogue. By allowing the reader to supply appropriate actions wherever a blank space appears, the Martian writer is sharing the pleasure of the creative act. True, the author of Terran Menace uses the device with the heavy hand of a novice. But there are notable examples of its use wherein as many as thirteen separate characters speak, each keeping a separate and distinct personality. The prime example of such artistry, of course, is to be found in the works of the Martian D.H.G.)*

"Are you familiar with our society?"

"No."

"I did not think you were."

Our society is composed of Ones and Others. Troo Lada and I are Ones."

"And the males are Others?"

"The what?"

"Never mind. I understand. Go on."

"As long as you understand.

The Others serve an apprenticeship with the One who gave them birth. This apprenticeship lasts approximately twenty-one years. Do you know what years are, Martian?"

"Yes."

"Good. At the end of that time, or sometimes before, an Other is passed on to a younger One who wishes him. He is then responsible to this One for the rest of his life."

"Responsible?"

"Yes. You understand the meaning of this word?"

"Of course. But its application . . ."

He must clothe the One, feed her. Comfort her during birth. Protect her from the wiles and lusts of his fellow Others. If he shirks this responsibility, he is liable to heavy penalties."

"I see."

"Do you know what 'work' is, Martian?"

"Yes."

"The Others work from the

time they take a younger One unto them. They work hard. Sometimes, when they are in their sixties, if they have managed to save enough for their own security, they retire."

"You mean? You mean they work just to keep alive? Just to keep eating?"

"Others are born to work, Martian. Ones are meant to be beautiful. But I should explain the auction."

"Please."

"Occasionally, there is an Other whom no One wants. The One who gave him birth then offers him at the auction, sells him to a wealthy Other who wishes to use his services.

You will be sold at auction."

"And the Rulers?"

"The Rulers, of course, are Ones. An Other has never ruled."

"I see."

"Of course, they may not allow us to offer you at auction, Martian. It is our understanding that they have other plans for Mars. You may fit into these plans."

"What!"

"You have noticed our ships in your skies, have you not?"

"Ships?"

"Yes, surely. Our pilots have reported being observed on several occasions."

R.N. looked at the squat green creature, her brown hair arranged in neat curls atop her ugly head. The discs, of course. The discs reported by fanatics all over Mars. If only they had heeded the warnings. He must get back! He must spread the word. By Phobos, he must get home!

Hurriedly, he built thoughts of escape.

To the ship. The tube, broken. Perhaps to blast off without repairs. Would the drive allow such? Would the strain be too great? He considered the possibilities.

(At this point, the author discusses the complicated technical design of the ship's power system. It is assumed this bit was included to appease the somewhat voracious appetites of the more "scientific" of the Martian readers. Space travel, of course, was a dimly-conceived possibility at the time, and the writer imaginatively built upon existing Martian scientific data to develop the mechanism of his drive. In the light of developments which made interplanetary flight a reality, and in view of Dr. Ballidan's and S.K.'s current strides in the development of an interstellar drive, this section seemed particularly archaic and was omitted here. The reader will note with amusement, incidentally, the reference to "discs" or

"saucers." Apparently, they caused Martians as much puzzlement as Earthmen. Venerians, whose peculiar ship design caused all the consternation before the mystery was solved, will undoubtedly derive special pleasure from the speculation outlined in the story.)

Gar Dano suddenly stepped into the room.

"The Rulers come, mother," he said.

"They will know what to do with you, Martian," the old one said.

Outside, R.N. could hear the strident blasts of unfamiliar instruments. A chant rose to assail his ears, and the steady beat of a drum thundered in the Terran night.

"Do you really intend to invade Mars?" he asked anxiously.

"Most assuredly."

"But why? Why?"

"The Rulers will be able to answer that," the old one said. "The Rulers formulate all policy."

The sound of the instruments was louder now, the drum beats closer, the chanting at a feverish pitch.

Escape, R.N.'s mind screamed.

He glanced around the interior of the dome. The old one was still seated at the short table, her clumsy-looking hands folded in her lap, her egg-eyes staring idly.

otically at R.N. Troo Lada stood against the curved wall, still pouting. Gar Dano was behind R.N., his weapon in his hands, his toeless feet spread wide apart. Outside, R.N. knew there were more of the creatures. Trapped! Trigger mind trafficking thoughts tirelessly. Senses snapping. Eyes excitedly enervated. Fingers flexed. Toes tense. Heart heavy.

Reach, run, rush!

R.N. lashed out with a closed fist. He felt the shock of contact tingle up his arm as his fist collided with Gar Dano's loathsome face.

"Stop!" shrilled the old one.

"Martian! Martian!" screamed young Troo Lada, egg-eyes popping.

R.N. scrambled for the door. He pushed his way through the milling creatures that blocked his path. *Run*, his mind screamed. *Run, run, RUN!*

He was outside now, the purple growth tangling beneath his boots. In the distance, he glimpsed a procession of the green creatures, instruments gleaming in the moonlight, led by three females in garish costumes.

They saw him, and they began to shout, their voices reaching out to scratch at his senses. *Run! RUN!*

He darted into the dense wood past the purple-grown clearing. He heard heavy footsteps behind him, hoarse shouts, wild screams. And then he heard a sudden stillness and a *swiissssssh* that darted across the clearing and into the woods.

The first blast clipped his right shoulder, spinning him around. He fell against the trunk of a tall orange tree, braced himself there for a moment, then pushed himself erect.

The second blast lashed into his ribs, and he doubled over in pain. He heard the terrible *swiissssssssh* again, and a searing, stabbing, aching torment lashed at his heart.

The last blast severed his head from his body.

His last thoughts were of L.E. And of the glory that had been Mars.

(It is interesting to note that Martian science-fiction stories did not always end happily.)

OUTSIDE IN THE SAND

He had to kill the monster to save Captain Peevy. Then he was going to kill Peevy.

By EVAN HUNTER



IT LAY crouched on the red sand dunes, squat and silvery, its blasting tubes tangled into a shapeless mass of metal. The sand rose in biting gusts, slicing at the *Mars Six*, whirling against its sides in ferocious onslaughts. The crippled ship resisted each new attack, trembling against the overwhelming power of sand and wind.

Inside, Lieutenant Enoch crouched against the starboard bulkhead, his blaston clutched tightly in his right hand, his finger trembling on the trigger. Like a taut rubber band, his lips were drawn tightly across his face. There was a trace of fear and anticipation in his brightly lit eyes as he listened to the Martian wind screeching outside,

heaving the coarse, rasping sand against the ship huddled silently on the dunes.

I hate Captain Peevy, he thought. I hate Captain Peevy and I am going to kill him soon. The sand slashed at the metal sides of the ship, and Enoch wondered how long it would be before Nature succeeded in slicing the ship to ribbons.

"A tough break," they'd be saying back on Earth. "Should have known it couldn't be done. Five ships before them."

He could almost see Colonel Danvers puffing on his pipe, shrugging his shoulders, speaking softly. "Well, that's that. Man will just have to wait awhile. Space is still beyond his scope of knowledge. A tough break, but what can you do?"

Sure, sure, a tough break, Enoch thought. It had been tough breaks that had sent five previous ships off into space, never to be heard from again. It had been tough breaks that caused his bum landing, that had twisted the blasting tubes into uselessness, that had left him and the Captain at the mercy of wind and sand . . . and whatever else was on this planet.

Captain! The thought of Peevy sent a surge of impatience through Enoch. What was keeping the man? He'd gone outside to get an accurate position, to

plot landmarks that would guide rescue ships from Earth. But that was ten minutes ago. Could he have suspected what Enoch had planned for him? No. No. Enoch put the thought from his mind.

Still, Peevy's luck had been phenomenal. They had been through Space School together. Peevy was bright, but Enoch had been close to him all through school. Together, they led the class in grades. They had both graduated with high honors, had both received their commissions together. And then they had served their apprenticeships on two separate mail carriers on the Moon run.

And then, the chance to be the first men to reach Mars! This was no petty Moon hop. No, they'd served their apprenticeships well, and Earth was now granting its two most promising Spacemen the chance at something bigger. Mars. Mars, the formidable, the unattainable. Five other ships had been defeated by the fiery red ball in the sky. And they had been chosen to man the sixth.

The two young lieutenants, pale from space and from the importance of the occasion, had stood before Colonel Danvers' desk had watched him meditatively puff on his pipe as he examined their records.

"One of you will be in command, you know," he had said.

The Lieutenants had glanced at each other, and Enoch had experienced another wave of hatred and jealousy for the man who had graduated in first place, leaving him mere second honors. The colonel had sized them up with his eyes, and was now looking over their papers again.

"What do you know about space communication?" he had asked Enoch.

"Enough to get by, sir," Enoch had answered.

"What does that mean exactly?" Danvers asked.

"Space School, sir. All types of gear studied. Sugar Mike, George, Peter. I operated the Sugar Yoke on the Moon run."

"And the new gear?" Danvers asked. "The Imperial series? What do you know about it?"

"I've heard of it, sir." He had begun to tremble a little.

"Can you operate it?"

He hesitated. "No, sir. But I can learn," he hastily added.

"Mmmm," Danvers murmured. He turned to Lieutenant Peevy. "I see, Peevy, that you've taken several supplementary courses while operating on the Moon run. Are you familiar with Imperial VIII?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the later series? Imperial XII and up?"

"Yes, sir. The courses covered

maintenance and operation of all those types."

Danvers had smiled and glanced at Enoch. "The new ship will have only Imperial gear on it, Enoch. Naturally, the man in command will be expected to know this gear thoroughly." He had dismissed Enoch with disinterested eyes and said to Peevy, "You'll be in command, Captain Peevy."

Captain Peevy!

Peevy had grinned and the colonel added, "You may consider this an official promotion."

LUCK, Enoch thought, sheer luck. A few non-required courses, and Peevy had accidentally hit upon the gear the *Mars Six* would be carrying. His knowledge wasn't going to do him much good when he got back, though. Not much good at all. A slight smile curled Enoch's lips. He was through taking second honors. Peevy would naturally receive all the acclaim for this trip. After all, he commanded the ship. It was too bad the landing had been a bad one, temporarily spoiling Enoch's plan. If the landing had been smooth, he'd have killed Peevy immediately and taken the ship back to Earth to claim the plaudits of the universe. Now, Enoch could do nothing but wait until Peevy had contacted Earth

and given them information about their present situation.

Then he would kill the other man and wait for the rescue ship from Earth. It wouldn't be the same as returning to Earth in triumph, of course. But it still had its benefits. He would be acclaimed as the survivor of the first successful expedition to Mars. Peevy would be chalked off as the weakling, the man who had succumbed.

Damn that Imperial gear! he suddenly thought. He'd have been able to contact Earth alone were it not for the new gear. This way, he needed Peevy. If Earth received no word from them, they'd assume this expedition had gone the way of the previous five, and the project would be shelved until Man had learned more about space. Once they knew it was feasible, once Peevy contacted them and told them about the crippling landing, another ship would be dispatched immediately. Once Peevy had made that contact, Enoch would kill him.

The monster appeared suddenly at the port blister!

Its face was a blob of crimson, shapeless, dripping. Its flowing mane leaped about its head in wild fury. Enoch backed against the bulkhead, fear gripping his mind.

The creature's eyes were wild,

enormous saucers set against the blood-red of its head.

"Go away!" Enoch screeched in terror. "Go away!" The cry was torn from his lips involuntarily. The creature vanished from sight and Enoch tremblingly adjusted the intensity lever of his blaston to full potency, enough of a blast to kill a man . . . or whatever hovered outside in the sand. And Peevy was out there, too! Enoch's only means of contacting Earth was outside with that monster. The only open course was evident. Enoch would have to kill this monster, then go out after Peevy, assuming that Peevy was still alive. And he had to be alive, he had to be! The thought of saving a man he hated annoyed Enoch. But he comforted himself with the knowledge that he was saving him temporarily, only until he had made the necessary contact with Earth. After that, he would kill him and seal the ship against any more of these monsters that might be roaming around outside.

Again, the crimson ugly face appeared at the port blister. The sand whirled around the looming, grotesque figure. The wind blasted sand against the plastic-glass, tore at the sides of the ship. Again, Enoch wondered how long the ship would last against this erosive onslaught. And he

thought of Peevy outside there for nearly fifteen minutes now. And then the monster disappeared again.

Enoch stared into the darkness around the port blister for a long time. His plans were clear. Kill the monster, dash outside to get Peevy, seal the ship, wait until Peevy had contacted the Earth, and then kill him.

A thunderous hammering, louder than the sound of wind and sand combined, began at the starboard blister. Enoch whirled to see the monster in rage, shouting wildly, incoherently, clawing at the blister with desperate red claws.

Should he shoot? Suppose there were more? Should he blast the plastiglass, opening the side of the ship to the attack of wind, and sand, and monsters? He didn't have to wonder long. The thing outside was waving a blasting gun, shouting insanely. A blinding flash filled the night and the plastiglass shattered into nothingness, followed immediately by a rush of sand and wind into the cabin.

The creature, its head a dangling crimson mass of ribbons, climbed ponderously into the cabin of the ship.

"Back!" Enoch screamed. The creature shouted incoherently, its

insane eyes gleaming brightly in the darkness of the ship. The terrible, biting sand lashed in behind it.

Enoch's blaston shuddered once, twice, and the creature dropped to the deck, its body blown from under it. The sand sliced into the cabin, already smoothing the plastiglass shards that jutted up from the broken blister.

Enoch approached the thing, gun in trembling hand. He turned the remains of the body over, and looked full at the face. It was crimson and shapeless, rutted with cuts. The hair was matted thick with coarse sand. The clawlike hands were ripped clean of skin, almost to the bone.

It wasn't until Enoch saw the two silver bars clinging to the creature's tattered tunic that he realized he'd killed Captain Peevy.

The sand that had slashed Peevy's face to ribbons maliciously swirled in through the broken plastiglass blister, whipping at Enoch's head, slicing at the Imperial gear.

Enoch squinted his eyes against the sand, and looked once more at the battered figure on the deck. Then he turned the blaston on himself.

Riw loved Alma. But Riw was only a gnome, and Alma's boy-friend Charlie was a strong, handsome ghost.



EXPATRIATE

By LARRY M. HARRIS

ALMA was sunning herself on the green lawn of her grave. She was thinking of nothing, so as not to overtax her brain. Alma had very little brain, but this lack was compensated for by a great deal of assorted ethereal body, over which she had draped bits of winding-sheet in an effort to gild the lily by making herself, impossibly, more attractive. If she could have been

unhappy about anything, she would have been unhappy that she had no spectators. However, she was of cowlike and contented mind as she lay on her grave, exposing her charms to the sun and sky.

A knock sounded. "Alma?" said a voice. "Am I disturbing you?"

"Charlie! Come here!" Alma sounded suddenly joyous; her

breath came quickly, presenting a fantastic series of bodily motions to the spectator.

Charlie left off knocking on a tree-trunk and bounded into the clearing like a handsome Saint Bernard in search of a bone. Alma sat up and threw wide her arms. They snuggled.

Some moments passed.

"I love you madly," Charlie announced.

"Me too. You're so big and handsome. Kiss me."

There was silence. Then Alma said, with muffled ecstasy, "Crush me."

Charlie said, "Gee." He was effectively muffled, but managed to break free for a second. He continued, "Gee. I bet this is just how Launcelot . . ."

Then everything happened at once. Something buckled the ground off to one side, and stones and chunks of dirt went rolling and bouncing in all directions.

"Earthquake!" Charlie yelled, scooping Alma up in his arms. Phrases were coming back to his fevered brain, slowly and confusedly. "Run for cover!" he shouted. Alma slid passionate arms around his neck. "Women and childr . . ." he said, as she kissed him long and savagely.

The trapdoor opened. A face came slowly out, brushing the tips of its gargantuan ears against the sides of the door. "Just

thought I'd come out and get some fresh air," said the face, displaying a set of yellow and pointed teeth below its splayed nose. "Hi, Charlie."

Charlie let go his hold on Alma, forgetting that she still had him clasped about the neck. She started to fall and he received a stunning blow on the medulla. Alma dropped to the ground and sat up brightly. Charlie, unconscious, bent over and fell on his face in a pile of dirt.

The face looked around. A hand came up and scratched its bald dome with blackened fingernails.

"What have you two been doing?" it said. "Alma, you . . ."

"I love you," Alma said, blinking rapidly. The face looked astonished and pleased for a minute.

Then Alma began manfully to pull Charlie out of the dirt. She wiped off his face and embraced him.

"Oh," said the face sadly. Climbing out of the trapdoor, Riw surveyed his three-foot, gnomic frame. *If I were bigger and more handsome and stronger*, he thought, *maybe she'd . . . but that's impossible. Damn their damned incompetence. If they'd altered the probability, or whatever it is Gravel does, maybe I wouldn't ever have met Alma. I*

wouldn't have been buried here, or the humans would have built their graveyard someplace else, and I'd have been happy. I'd have married some dumpy gnome and lived happily ever after.

But if I'd never seen her . . .

I can't even wish that. Even just seeing her is something. I suppose I should be grateful.

Charlie opened his eyes. "I love you madly," he said indistinctly.

Riw tightened his lips. He walked over and tapped Charlie on the shoulder. Nothing happened. Alma and Charlie, snuggling, were apparently immune to anything.

Riw tapped a little harder and then, in a burst of ferocity, shook Charlie's shoulder. Something dropped with a limp thud to the ground and lay there, faintly transparent as Alma and Charlie were. Riw looked at the gilt cover of the book and read: *Stories Of King Arthur*.

It was, Riw knew, Charlie's Bible. The human ghost turned around to face him, the stupor clearing from his eyes; he looked like Sir Galahad, ready to be helpful and rescue things in distress. "What is it, Riw? Gee. If there's anything I could do . . ."

"Yes. You could," Riw said, murder in his hoarse little voice. "You and Alma could—move

somewhere else—or something. Because I—"

Alma took her head from Charlie's broad chest. "No!" she said. Charlie, looking torn, opened his mouth and shut it several times.

"Okay," Riw said, finally. "I'll go walk somewhere else, I guess. It's okay. I don't mind."

"Gee," Charlie said.

"Never mind. It's okay." Absently, Riw kicked up a cloud of dust. He started to sneeze. His ears flapped, brushing each other in back of his bulbous head, and then subsided to a diminishing waggle. Riw took a grayed handkerchief from his back pocket and blew vigorously.

You could do something for me, he thought bitterly. You could go shoot yourself. And if I asked you, you probably would at that. You only read one book in your life, and that had to be King Arthur. If anybody asks you to do anything, you do it. But you're an idiot . . .

This isn't getting me anywhere. If I could only . . .

Riw walked off slowly. Halfway down the road, he stopped to sneeze again. His ears tangled behind his head, and he straightened them quickly.

Behind him, Alma said, "Gesundheit."

"Look," said Gravel patiently, "was it my fault? Did I do any-

thing? Did they even *ask* me?"

"Don't argue with me," said the Intelligence Corporal, a small fat gnome. "Orders from the top. They say come see 'em, you come see 'em. How d'you know it's about that Riw business, anyhow?"

"What else, you fathead?" Gravel's scraggly beard oscillated slightly. "Have I made a mistake? Do you think . . ."

"No, no, of course not. But maybe there's something else. And if the Colonel says come, you better come. You know how it is with the Colonel." He tapped his forehead significantly.

"'Something else,' huh? I'm not paying strict attention to my business, is that it? Somebody thinks I'm running around with—with women, is that it?"

The fat gnome ran a finger around the inside of his uniform collar. "I'm only a Corporal, Gravel—I mean Mr. Gravel," he added seeing the dangerous look in the scientist's eyes. "I can't do a thing. But why not go see the Colonel? He's nuts already. Maybe you two would have a lot to talk over."

"All right. All right. First you come in here, uninvited, while I'm working. Me. The foremost probability scientist, human, gnome or Other, in the world." He gestured toward a small crystal shining, translucently, in a

corner. "Just because some hundred years ago a gnome named Riw got himself buried without having me called in to inspect the site. I could have fixed him up then—a hundred years ago! —but *now* you call me in!"

"Well, if anyone can do anything, you can, Mr. Gravel," the Corporal said nervously.

"Grr," said Gravel. The Corporal stopped. "You—you insult your Commanding Officer. You insult me. You drag me down to see him—to do him a favor, mind you, by inspecting the probabilities and picking the one that'll get him out of this mess—you drag me down by implying that we're both insane. It's too much, but I'm a patient man. I'll put up with this—"

He marched out the door. The little Corporal stumbled after him. "—but there are limits to what I can put up with. And if one more thing happens, I'll—I'll—never mind. You'll transmigrate in pieces. Little piec . . ."

Gravel tripped over an outlying root. He sat up slowly, baring his teeth. His beard shivered ominously back and forth. He stood up and tottered a few steps, tremblingly, like a clockwork doll. His face was a pastel lavender.

The Corporal stood stock-still.

"You did it," Gravel said.

"Me? I didn't do anyth . . . ow!"

Gravel took a firmer grip on the Corporal's large ear and proceeded to twist it. Suddenly he let go and started to laugh. Dismay, apprehension and terror chased each other across the Corporal's face. He started to run:

"Hey!" Gravel shouted. "Come back! I won't hurt you! What do you think I am anyhow?"

The little Corporal stopped and looked around. Gravel, with a smile bisecting his bearded face, was standing under a small tree. The Corporal began to approach him, slowly.

"Come *on*," Gravel said. "I want to talk to you."

Rubbing his ear, the Corporal moved toward him.

"Now, look," Gravel said. "Just what does your damned Colonel want me for, anyhow?"

The Corporal shrugged helplessly. "I told you, I don't know."

"Riw?" Gravel said, not unkindly.

The Corporal shrugged again. "Look, Gravel—Mr. Gravel—"

"Oh, call me Gravel," the scientist said. Then he started to laugh again. "You looked so damned funny with me hanging on to your ear . . ."

The Corporal knocked on the door. Gravel waited a few feet behind, observing the hut with something like envy. His own

hut was more of a ramshackle affair, hastily built—though, of course, it was more functional. You couldn't rebuild strongly every time some damned experiment exploded; it would take too much valuable time.

From inside the house a voice floated. It was clear, high, and distorted by a palpably false French accent.

"Come een."

The Corporal opened the door timidly. "Ah," said the voice, "my little Corporal, he returns. But where is the M. Gravel?"

Gravel strode in. "Right behind him," he said. "Bruce and I—" He stopped dead.

Colonel Kroll, head of the Gnome Intelligence Service, was a gnome about four feet three inches tall, towering over Gravel's undersized three feet nine. He was clothed in a pair of violent red puttees and a blue military jacket. His left hand was stuck inside the jacket, in a Napoleonic manner. On his head was a cocked hat, precisely settled at a fifteen-degree tilt.

"Ah," said this apparition, "you and my little Corporal Bruce ~~are~~ friends. How good. But let us not waste my time or yours, Monsieur—*mon vieux*, if you permit?" He resettled his cocked hat without removing his left hand from its place. "Let us be calm, cool—how you say?—

collective. I have a problem, about this M. Riw. I have for myself great hopes that you may solve it for me. For this I can return many favors. I have money, my friend, at my disposal. With this money you can buy—many things. A new crystal, perhaps? Or—the good things of life? We are men of the world, *mon vieux*. We understand each other, no?"

The Colonel permitted himself a small wink. Gravel, a little stunned by the flow of pidgin French, nodded weakly.

"I am so glad," said the Colonel, "that my two little friends have made themselves friends of each other."

Gravel passed a shaking hand over his suddenly dewy forehead. "Yes, sir. But let's get down to business. I have work to do at home, if you don't mind. What did you want to see me about?"

"So abrupt, these little ones. Tsk. *Mais*—it is the case of this M. Riw. You have heard of it?"

"Only indirectly. Nobody ever asked me anything, so I can't take the responsibility for anything that happened. I could have told them a human graveyard was to be built there. . . ."

"Yes, yes, *mon petit*, I can understand all that. Then perhaps I had better go into details for you, no?"

Gravel set his teeth. It would

not be wise to disagree—the guy was clearly nutty, and no telling what a nut would do. *Besides*, he thought, *I'll have to get the set-up from somebody*. "Sure, sir, if you would be so kind. . . ."

"It is nothing, I assure you. The details are these: it happened almost two hundred years ago, while I was in—while I was in another form. A human, to be exact—that of *le grand—le plus grand*—Napoleon. Ah, but this transmigration that must take care of us all—"

"Ulp," said Gravel.

"*Oui, mon vieux*," said Colonel Kroll, settling his hand inside his vest. "As you must know, when one of us—one of we gnomes—reaches the age of two hundred and ten, we dig for him a grave in which he can in peace lie down."

Gravel debated trying to make sense out of the sentence and gave it up. Later, he would find out from somebody else.

"We must see, of course, that we do not bother the humans of the earth. Even in my time, when the gnomes were disappear from the world, people began to wonder—where are they going? The answer—so simple, *mon petit*—was: Underground.

"At any speed, however—" *Nobody can be as untranslatable as that*, Gravel thought darkly—"we must put on the unfortunate

a spell so that he will stay quiet, so peaceful, in his grave for most of the time, and when he must come out—for companionship, of course; you are a man of the world, *mon vieux*, and you understand these things, no?—he will stay within the limits of our graveyard. It has been so planned, and who are we to with it quarrel?

"In the case of the *pauvre* M. Riw, however, something went very wrong with our organs—that is how you say it, no?—with our machinery. The —"

Bruce cut in "Colonel, if you don't mind, I'll finish up, and you can devote yourself to other things for a second."

Thank God, Gravel thought.

Bruce said, "Well, it ended up like this. Nobody called you in to find the probability futures. They were all too sure of themselves. So Riw was bound to the graveyard. Then, before anybody else could get in, the humans built their own graveyard in the same spot. With an iron fence around it. We can't get in, Riw can't get out. And some higher-up has started an investigation. So we've got to do something or land on our heads. See?"

Gravel sighed. "Yeah. But what can we do—outside, maybe, of changing the future so as to

make Riw's life easier for him?"

"*C'est ça!*" screamed the Colonel. "But of course! What—equipments will you need, *mon petit*?"

Gravel wondered if the Colonel knew that the French had more than two terms of endearment. Aloud, he said, "Well, I don't know whether there's anything we can do, so I'll set up a crystal set to run through all the futures. If anything comes up, it'll show on the ball, and I'll let you know."

"*Oui*," said the Colonel. "Come, Corporal Bruce."

"Sir, I may need some help. And it's not that you're unskilled or anything, but it may be a little dangerous. . . ."

"Ah, of course. Corporal, you will assist M. Gravel in his work."

The door slammed. The little Corporal turned with fear in his eyes. "It isn't really—"

"Nope. But I had to get him out of the way somehow. Is he always like that?"

"Pretty near. Can I give you a hand?"

"Thanks, Bruce. Just hand me that crystal ball. Yeah, over there—and those wires. That'll do it, I hope."

Colonel Kroll stood over them, Napoleonically. "All is in readiness, yes?" he asked.

Gravel nodded. "As soon as

we know anything, now, we'll call you. No need to worry. But if you'd leave now—sparks, electricity—you understand?"

"But of course," Kroll said. "Corporal, remain, if you please."

Again the door slammed. Bruce said, softly,

"Are you sure everything's all right?"

Gravel faced him. "Nothing's all right. The quality of the balls they send me nowadays. The idiots send me a receiving set. I can't do anything but watch. I can't transmit. Which means—"

"We might as well die," Bruce finished heavily. "If we don't find the solution, and act on it, then we'll lose our jobs. All of us. Even you."

"Me?"

Bruce nodded. "You got into this. Now you can't get out of it. We'll all die. Starvation."

Gravel muttered, "Transmigration you mean," touching a wire.

Bruce said, "What?"

"Transmigration. Means changing bodies. See, a gnome can't die, since he doesn't breathe and so doesn't oxidate. But if something happens that'd normally kill him—if he could die, understand — then he transmigrates. He goes into a different body—the nearest one around, within a twenty-mile radius—and

leaves his for somebody else who has to transmigrate. See?"

"No," said the Corporal.

"Well, maybe if I—oh, hell what's the difference? There isn't anything we can do. I wonder if Riw knows how much depends, now, on his doing the right thing? After a hundred years?"

"I don't know," Bruce said. "Let's watch, though, so we'll know."

"You're funny," Alma said happily.

"I like you."

"But you don't understand. I didn't want to tell you, but I can't keep it inside me any longer. I love you, Alma. I love you —er—madly." Riw sank to his knees. "Will you marry me?" He choked back a sneeze.

"Gee, you're funny," Alma mused. "And funny-looking, too."

Riw cursed inwardly. "I can't offer you much," he said doggedly. "A little underground hut, maybe, and whatever I've been able to scrape up—but you'll have my heart till the end of eternity. I don't know if I can make you happy—"

Alma giggled. Riw sneezed, shook his head, and went on.

"—but I'll try. I'll do whatever you want, Alma if only you'll consent to marry me."

"Goodness. But what would Charlie say?"

"Charlie . . . ! Can't you understand the simplest thing? I want to marry you. As soon as possible. Yes or no?"

"Well," said Alma, considering. She sat, thinking deeply, for a moment or two. Then she appeared to have made up her mind. "Thank you, no," she said, smiling prettily.

"But—but—God! How can I make you understand? I love you, Alma. I want to marry you."

"But I don't want to marry you. Really, it's all so simple, I don't see what you're making such a fuss about. You're not as big and strong as Charlie is. So I guess I'll marry him. If he asks me."

Riw's mouth opened and shut with a disconsolate snap. *There isn't even one single thing I can do about it*, he told himself sadly. *Not one single thing.*

"Besides," Alma mused, "Charlie's handsomer, anyway. So even if you were bigger and stronger, it wouldn't matter. So, no thank you. But thank you just the same."

"That's all right," Riw said, reaching up and patting Alma's shoulder awkwardly. "Perfectly all right." He got up from his knees slowly, then picked up a stone and with one swift, savage

motion flung it at a nearby rabbit. He missed it.

He sneezed, walking away. "Gesundheit," Alma said.

Gravel said, "If I could only do something. If I could only push this guy the way I want him to go."

Bruce stared at the coils and crystal. "But you can't, huh?" he asked hopefully.

"Damn it, no!" Gravel fumed. "And he has to pay attention to that little ghost of a human horror! Doesn't he know it's important?"

Bruce said, "I guess not. But what can you do?"

"If I could only tell him. If I could only convince him—the two of us would work out a solution. But I can't. The iron fence. We can't pass iron."

Bruce thought for a minute. "But you can shout past it, can't you?" he said quietly.

Gravel leaped as if he'd been struck. "Hey! That's it! That's it!"

The bland face of Colonel Kroll poked in the door. "Is it that you have solved of the problem? No?" he said.

Gravel spat, "Maybe, yes." He rushed out the half-open door. The two GIS men watched him go, wonderingly.

Riw lay in his coffin, facing the dirt ceiling of his under-

ground cave. His hand propped the lid open. He didn't want to sleep, yet. Not until he'd come to some conclusions about the problem that faced him.

He loved Alma. He wanted her to marry him—but she would not because he was too small and weak and ugly. Well, what did she expect from a gnome, after all? Gnomes didn't grow big like humans. They didn't breathe, so they stayed small. They had to live in the forest and hear things, so they had big ears. Smell things, so they had big noses. It was all functional, all for the best.

But try explaining that to Alma, his mind spat. Just try. She'll never understand. Love isn't logical, and neither is Alma. As a matter of fact, she's stupid.

Besides, that wouldn't do any good. Nothing would do any good, and he might as well knock his head against a stone and die. Without Alma, life, of course, wasn't worth living.

For the thousandth time, he cursed the idiots who had planted him without bothering to consult Gravel. Gravel could have got him out of the mess. Gravel could have....

And at that point a head poked through the side-wall of his grave. The head was even uglier than Riw himself was, by virtue of a peculiar gray weed

which Riw realized slowly was a beard. It looked like a malignant growth.

The head opened its mouth and said, "Hello, Roo."

"Riw," the gnome said automatically. Everybody in the graveyard had been pronouncing his name wrong for a hundred years. He'd finally stopped getting mad at it.

"My name is Gravel," the face said.

It took a second for that to sink in. Then Riw said, "Well, come in. Come in. Please come in." The head wagged.

"As soon as I can dig myself in," it said. "It's a good thing the locator worked. I hit you right first time. Would have been horrible to bump my head on some human coffin."

So this was the great Gravel. Riw thought he acted just like any other gnome. But, of course, he wasn't. He was the only gnome who could get him out of his current mess.

"Come on," Gravel said, "we're going out of here. I can cancel your conditioning and free you. You'll be set up in an entirely Gnome graveyard. No humans. Won't that be nice?"

Riw took only a second to think this over. "No," he said.

"No?"

"No."

"No?"

"That's right. I like it here. You can do things for me, but not that, if you don't mind."

Patiently, Gravel explained the situation. The higher-up who had started the investigation. The questions asked. The solution promised. The fact that he'd lose his job and probably starve (here he injected a sob or two for effect) if nothing were done.

Riw shook his head.

"No. I'm sorry, but no."

Gravel wriggled into the grave, making it uncomfortably crowded. For a while they lay in silence. Gravel was muttering in his beard. Riw caught some of the words and was shocked.

"I'll force you to come out," Gravel said. "I can do that too."

Riw said, "But I'll tell your investigators you forced me. I'll tell them I'm not happy."

Again, there was silence. Finally Gravel said, "Your elbow is in my stomach."

Riw muttered, "Sorry." He started to get up, push himself out of the grave and into the air again. Gravel followed. After some confusion, they were standing outside.

Gravel shrugged despairingly. "Well, what do you want?"

"I want to be big and strong and handsome," Riw said. "Like Charlie. But you wouldn't know about Charlie, would you?"

"I would," Gravel said. "I watched you. Figured I couldn't get in because of the iron, but I forgot about tunnelling under. Painful, but here I am. I know all about you. I've struggled to get here." He sobbed. "Now you won't let me take you back."

"But if you know all about me, then you know what I want," Riw said.

"Alma? That's simple." Gravel's face frowned. Then, suddenly, it broke into a smile. "And that'll make you happy, won't it?"

Riw nodded.

"We're saved!" Busily, the scientist began drawing up a plan of action. When he had repeated it a few times, and was sure that Riw understood it, he ducked back into the grave. "Be seeing you," he said.

Riw said, "Thanks. Goodbye." Then he went off in search of Charlie.

"Hi, Charlie."

"Oh. Hi, Roo."

"Riw. Look, Charlie, would you like to do a favor for a friend?"

"Sure, Roo. What would you like me to do?"

Riw tried to remember. What had the great Gravel told him? About health. But that couldn't be the way....

Oh, yes.

"Well, I've been reading about some of these health courses, and I was wondering if maybe— you being so healthy and all—if maybe you'd teach me some of the stuff. I'd pay you, of course."

(Gravel had told him: "It's triple-barrelled. First, he's chivalrous — *King Arthur*, remember? So he won't be able to resist the chance to do you a favor. Second, a little flattery never hurt anybody. And third, he won't be able to resist the chance to make the grand gesture and refuse the money. It can't fail."

"Gee," said Charlie, "I'd like to." He viewed his own physique with a kind of myopic pride. "But, gee, I couldn't take any money for it. I'd like to do it for free, but I couldn't take any money for it."

"Well, all right. I'll make it up to you somehow." Riw blazed with victory. His ears were stiff. He hoped to God Charlie would not notice. "When do we start?" he couldn't resist asking.

Charlie said, "Well. How about now?"

Riw said, remembering the words Gravel had drilled into him, "How about starting with artificial respiration?"

(Back at the GIS hut, Gravel crossed his fingers. Bruce and Colonel Kroll stood around, not daring to speak.)

Charlie was saying, "See, you lie down, and I get on top of you. See? Now I press down, and I come up, and I count. Like they taught me in gym. I liked gym. I could count good, see? *One-two-three-four- One-two-three-four- One-two-three-*"

Gravel said, "This is it. Want it to go on?"

Kroll said, "*Mais* of course, *mon vieux*. Why should it be to stopping?"

Gravel lied, "I can stop it. But if you do one thing, I won't."

Kroll's forehead bore sweat rapidly. "Name it, name it."

"That Bruce here be made a full Lieutenant under me."

Under cover of Kroll's fervent "Granted!" Gravel whispered, "It's the least I can do. After all, you started me off on the right track."

Bruce fainted slowly. Colonel Kroll clucked.

Gravel stared into the crystal ball.

"—four- *one-two-three-four*— hey, Roo? Roo?"

Riw lay on the ground, breathing for the first time in his three hundred and ten years. He didn't speak or otherwise move. Only his chest went up and down with horrible regularity.

"Roo!" Charlie screamed. "Roo! Answer me!"

Then he remembered. The book. King Arthur. Launcelot.

Chivalry. Avenging your honor and . . .

"Gee," he said "Maybe I killed him. He shouldn't breathe like that. I . . ."

That was it. Death rather than dishonor. Death rather than . . .

I killed him. . . .

"Gee," Charlie said. He bent down and bashed himself on the head with his own gravestone.

Mist and gray fog. The air floated in little eddies around him, from nothing into nothingness. Sound and light expanded into a deaf black infinity. Nothing and nothing except . . .

Transmigration, Riw thought. *I wonder. . . .*

He was intangible and without volume and he floated, cradle-rocking, for an age until . . .

"Gee," Charlie said.

Riw looked up. Then he got up. Of course.

The wound in his head, naturally, was cured by the same active agent that had caused the transmigration.

A natural agent, providing for everything. But you couldn't, naturally transmigrate into your own body.

Riw looked at Charlie. He kicked up a little dust with the toe of his magnificent, handsome right foot.

Charlie sneezed, his ears waggling behind him.

"Back pocket," Riw said. Charlie took the handkerchief and blew into it. He wiped his bulbous red nose and put the handkerchief back.

Riw strode off, his handsomeness a flame, to find Alma.

Charlie shrugged and sneezed again, patiently.

Over his shoulder, Riw called, "Gesundheit."

OUR SOLAR H-BOMB

A noted science writer details the latest developments in atomic and solar research.

By S. M. TURNER

THE biggest secret in the world today is whether we have the H-Bomb, and how well it will work. The last tests at Eniwetok sound as if we had developed it, but the scientists are sitting on the fence, saying yes and no in the same breath. There are no current pictures of such an explosion in the papers, at any rate.

Yet anyone with reasonably strong eyes can watch the operation of a gigantic H-bomb on any clear day between sunrise and sunset. It's perfectly safe, too. The big bomb is located about ninety-three million miles away; at that distance, even a hydrogen-fusion reactor nearly nine hundred thousand miles in diameter isn't very dangerous. The worst it can do is to give you a case of sunburn. That's logical enough—since that gigantic H-bomb *is* the sun!

Most of the stars we see are just such giant H-bombs, working on the carefully controlled conversion of hydrogen to helium. Of course, this is tricky

stuff for even stars to handle, and one gets out of control and explodes completely once in a while. But according to current knowledge, there isn't too much danger of that happening to our sun within any amount of time that we can imagine. If the hydrogen in the sun is ever completely burned up, however, there's a good chance of a blow-out that would melt Earth the way a blow-torch would melt soft butter.

There's nothing complicated about all this, except the theory that lies behind it, and the methods the astronomers use to discover such things. They've been working on it since long before the first uranium was fissioned here, and it's from their work with the sun that most of our ideas about hydrogen-fusion for the H-bomb first came. But it is only recently that they refined their figures enough to say that the sun is a genuine H-bomb, running by the straight fusion of hydrogen, instead of the old

theory they had which required carbon as well as hydrogen.

All the fusion reactions are really hot processes that work only under conditions of temperature expressed in tens of millions of degrees. But once you can get that temperature, they work very nicely. Here, we have to use a normal A-bomb to build up the temperature, with the hydrogen packed close around it. In the sun, this temperature comes as a normal thing. The extreme pressure inside the heart of the sun forces the atoms together, and they generate their own heat.

Hydrogen is the basis of our current fusion experiments, of course. This is the simplest of all the atoms. Normal hydrogen consists of a single, tiny, negatively-charged particle called the electron, spinning around another tiny, positively-charged particle called the proton; and no atom could be simpler than that. But this type of hydrogen (called hydrogen-1) isn't what will be used in the H-bomb. For that, deuterium or hydrogen-2 is one possibility. This is simply the same electron spinning around a nucleus, but the nucleus now consists of one proton and an added neutron, which is something like a proton, but has no charge at all. We can get a still more rare form (or isotope, as

these various forms of elements are called) of hydrogen by adding still another neutron to the nucleus; this is then known as tritium, or hydrogen-3.

Now, if we can force an atom of deuterium and an atom of tritium together, they will create an atom of helium, which has two electrons around a nucleus made up of two protons plus two neutrons. That will leave one neutron left over to add to the havoc of the bomb—and it will also free a tremendous amount of energy.

This is because mass (which causes weight in a gravity field) is lost in the "packing" of the two hydrogen atoms. If helium is said to have an atomic weight of 4.0, then hydrogen doesn't have a simple mass or atomic weight of 1.0; it comes out to 1.008. And it is the conversion of that .008 of mass into energy that really produces the results of the bomb.

This, of course, was the original theory of Einstein; he claimed that matter could be turned into energy, and gave a formula to show how it must work. Unlike most geniuses, he has lived to see his theories proved true.

Since 1938, there hasn't been much question about the sun getting all its energy from some method of changing hydrogen to

helium. But the original theory of how it was done was totally unlike the inside of an H-bomb exploding. It was known as the "Solar Phoenix" reaction, and involved about a dozen steps, with carbon acting as a sort of marriage broker between the hydrogen atoms, until at last enough were added to the family to produce helium. Then the carbon atom stepped out of the hot celebration, and went looking for more hydrogen.

Now Dr. E. E. Salpeter of Cornell University reports that most of the sun's reaction isn't any such complicated business, after all. It almost seems as if old Sol had decided that if men were going to find simpler ways of doing things, he'd still show them they had nothing on him. Because the reaction Salpeter describes is the direct conversion of hydrogen into helium, just as it will be done—or has been done—in the H-bomb.

This new reaction is known as the proton-proton sequence. In the sun, of course, the terrific pressures have forced the protons at the nuclei of the atoms into close contact; in fact, they are under extreme pressure to get together completely. And this they do. Two of the protons—the hearts of the atoms of simple hydrogen—combine. Now, protons don't like to stick together

that way—it takes neutrons to bind them together. But under the right conditions a proton can apparently spit out energy of some kind and turn into a neutron. That happens here, and we now have an atom of deuterium where there were two hydrogen atoms before.

This isn't a very rapid process. It averages something like eight billion years for such a combination! But that's the average of uncountable atoms, and some are constantly combining. Once combined, however, the next step is run through in a mere matter of four seconds! Another atom of hydrogen is forced into the deuterium atom, giving us two protons and a neutron—which is the basis for an unstable atom known as helium-3: (Hydrogen-3 has two neutrons and one proton.)

With the really urgent business finally done, the atom now takes a little time to think things over. But finally, after an average of 400,000 years, two of these helium-3 atoms decide to combine. They kick out two of the protons (as simple hydrogen atoms, with electrons to balance the books, of course). This leaves two protons and two neutrons—the nucleus of helium. And the same loss of mass produces a terrific wallop of energy, which then filters up through the layers of the sun.

It starts out as gamma-rays, which are even harder than X-rays; but in fighting its way up, most of it is gradually cut down through soft X-rays, then to ultra-violet, and finally to the light which we see from the surface of the sun.

In case this monkeying around with single atoms seems like small-time stuff, it might be nice to look at the total of all the atoms reacting. Every second, 564 million tons of hydrogen is converted into about 560 million tons of helium, leaving some four million tons of mass to be converted into energy.

And in case you've ever wondered what Einstein's formula, $E=Mc^2$, really means, it figures out to the fact that one "pound" of that mass yields six million million horsepower of energy during that second. Multiply that by eight billion, and you're handling energy by the carload lot. In fact, only about one billionth of it reaches Earth, yet it's enough to keep us going at full tilt here, including the energy we're using on our own private small-scale H-bomb experimenting.

The solar process is an explosion; no other word can cover the violence of such an atomic reaction. It has no resemblance to a fire, or to the slow break-down of radium. But since only a small fraction of a tiny part of the

mere beginnings of one percent of the hydrogen in the sun takes part in this, it's under pretty good control.

Such a chain reaction would not be possible on Earth, in any event, and no H-bomb is going to touch it off. It requires pressure beyond anything we can imagine to keep it going. In our atmosphere, the problem is to get it to work at all. As soon as it reaches temperatures in the order of millions of degrees, the exploding stuff starts to get out of there in a wild burst that soon damps down the whole reaction. That's the actual physical explosion we feel—the expanding of the stuff that's exploding, together with the tremendously super-heated air around it.

Air simply isn't dense enough to support such a reaction for any length of time. Even the core of Earth isn't that dense. But the sun offers a perfect spot for such continuous action.

However, the balance between pressure and temperature acts as a perfect, automatic governor on the process. If the atomic reaction were to slow down, the interior of the sun would begin to cool—and the pressure would increase, making it easier for atoms to combine, and hence speeding up the reaction again. If the reaction begins to get out of hand, the temperature makes

the sun expand a trifle. The nuclei are then further apart, the reaction slows down—and we get back to normal again.

At least, that's the way it should work.

But we're still dealing with a bomb, and not a furnace. It could get out of control, in ways not fully understood. We know this, however, because we've seen other stars explode. These novas (or novae), as they are called, are fairly common occurrences in the experiences of astronomers.

One day there will be a star in the telescope—a nice, normal star, just a speck at high magnification. The next time it is seen, it will be a huge spot of intense light. The star has blown up, with a violence that would blow its outer shell far beyond the orbit of Earth, if it were our sun exploding.

This is one of the classic astronomical ideas of how the Earth might end. The flaming stuff of the sun would evaporate all the seas almost instantly, crisp all life away without even time for the first sensation, and melt the surface down to molten slag for a distance of miles beneath the surface. Nothing could survive such a flare-up of the sun.

At a time like that, if there were anyone to see it, the sun would be proving conclusively that it was a monstrous H-bomb,

and that no bomb is completely safe. But no one could see it, since the terrific heat of the blast would travel at the speed of light—the initial blast being just light in an intensity never before known. It would destroy at the exact instant it could be seen.

Such novas are common, as astronomical phenomena. But when the total number of stars is balanced against the frequency of such explosions, the process of going nova proves to be a very rare occurrence. There's a lot more chance of the Earth being destroyed by men in the next million years than by the sun going nova. It isn't worth losing any sleep over.

And the *really* spectacular performance of which a star is capable is even rarer. This is known as a super-nova. Among all the vast numbers of stars we can see, it occurs only once every three hundred years or so. There is literally no way of describing such an explosion. A star so distant as to be invisible to the naked eye could flare up until it seemed like a great light in the sky, as in the case of one such reported by Chinese observers in 1054. The star then literally blows to pieces and becomes a vast cloud of dust.

Fortunately, this is something which needn't concern us for uncounted eons yet, if the latest

theory on this proves to be true. Dr. Lyle B. Borst, of the University of Utah, suggests that this comes from a totally different atomic reaction, having nothing to do with hydrogen. In this, helium does the dirty work. Two atoms of helium combine to produce one atom of a radioactive isotope of beryllium (one not found normally on Earth). This is so violent that a star could convert all its helium to beryllium in a single day—with the output that a normal star uses over periods of millions of years.

One test for this is the fact that the isotope of beryllium has been created artificially in the laboratory and has been found to decay to half its strength in fifty-three days. According to all accounts of the super-novas of 1054, 1572, and 1604, the flare of light fell off by half in about that length of time.

The comforting thing about this, however, is the fact that such a reaction doesn't begin until a star has used up all its hydrogen in producing helium.

Only then does it shift over to this other violent reaction.

That means that we can go on looking at the sun in comfort through our smoked glass for some time yet. In fact, the sun has hydrogen enough to keep going for millions of years without any sign of slacking off. And by that time, the human race may have moved on to another, younger star.

But no human being, however far in the future or greatly advanced, will be able to outdo our sun when it comes to showing what a really first-class atomic bomb can be. While the scientists worry about getting the best possible H-bomb built, they'll have Nature's own example over their heads.

The sun has been H-bombing us with the energy that gives us life for as long as the human race has been around. And that colossal H-bomb will still be supporting us long after we've learned to put away our weapons and perhaps harness the same process usefully.

Who was the unseen Belisarius? Why was he hiring these men? Jarvis didn't know, but he realized he had to find out—or be killed.



SHAPE-UP

By JACK VANCE

JARVIS came down Riverview Way from the direction of the terminal warehouse, where he had passed an uncomfortable night. At the corner of Sion Novack Way he plugged his next-to-last copper into the *Pegasus Square Farm and Mining Bulletin* dispenser; taking the pink tissue envelope, he picked his way

through the muck of the street to the Original Blue Man Cafe. He chose a table with precision and nicety, his back to a corner, the length of the street in his line of sight.

The waiter appeared, looked Jarvis up and down. Jarvis countered with a hard stare. "Hot anise, a viewer."

The waiter turned away. Jarvis relaxed, sat rubbing his sore hip and watching the occasional dark shape hurrying against the mist. The streets were still dim; only one of the Procrustean suns had risen: no match for the fogs of Idle River.

The waiter returned with a dull metal pot and the viewer. Jarvis parted with his last coin, warmed his hands on the pot, notched in the film, and sipped the brew, giving his attention to the journal. Page after page flicked past: trifles of Earth news, cluster news, local news, topical discussions, practical mechanics. He found the classified advertisements, employment opportunities, skimmed down the listings. These were sparse enough: a well-digger wanted, glass puddlers, berry-pickers, creep-weed chasers. He bent forward; this was more to his interest:

Shape-up: Four travellers of top efficiency. Large profits for able workers; definite goals in sight. Only men of resource and willingness need apply. At 10 meridian see Belisarius at the Old Solar Inn.

Jarvis read the paragraph once more, translating the oblique phrases to more definite meanings. He looked at his watch: still three hours. He glanced at

the street, at the waiter, sipped from the pot, and settled to a study of the *Farm and Mining Journal*.

Two hours later the second sun, a blue-white ball, rose at the head of Riverview Way, flaring through the mist; now the population of the town began to appear. Jarvis took quiet leave of the cafe and set off down Riverview Way in the sun.

Heat and the exercise loosened the throb in his hip; when he reached the river esplanade his walk was smooth. He turned to the right, past the Memorial Fountain, and there was the Old Solar Inn, looking across the water to the gray marble bluffs.

Jarvis inspected it with care. It looked expensive but not elaborate, exuding dignity rather than elegance. He felt less skeptical; Bulletin notices occasionally promised more than they fulfilled; a man could not be too careful.

He approached the inn. The entrance was a massive wooden door with a stained glass window, where laughing Old Sol shot a golden ray upon green and blue Earth. The door swung open; Jarvis entered, bent to the wicket.

"Yes, sir?" asked the clerk.

"Mr. Belisarius," said Jarvis.

The clerk inspected Jarvis with much the expression of the waiter

at the cafe. With the faintest of shrugs, he said, "Suite B—down the lower hall."

Jarvis crossed the lobby. As he entered the hall he heard the outer door open; a huge blond man in green suede came into the inn, paused like Jarvis by the wicket. Jarvis continued along the hall. The door to Suite B was ajar; Jarvis pushed it open, entered.

He stood in a large room panelled with dark green sea-tree, furnished simply—a tawny rug, chairs and couches around the walls, an elaborate chandelier decorated with glowing spangles—so elaborate, indeed, that Jarvis suspected a system of spy-cells. In itself this meant nothing; in fact, it might be construed as commendable caution.

Five others were waiting: men of various ages, size, skin-color. Only one aspect did they have in common; a way of seeming to look to all sides at once. Jarvis took a seat, sat back; a moment later the big blond man in green suede entered. He looked around the room, glanced at the chandelier, took a seat. A stringy gray-haired man with corrugated brown skin and a sly reckless smile said, "Omar Gildig! What are you here for, Gildig?"

The big blond man's eyes became blank for an instant; then

he said, "For motives much like your own, Tixon."

The old man jerked his head back, blinked. "You mistake me; my name is Pardee, Captain Pardee."

"As you say, Captain."

There was silence in the room; then Tixon, or Pardee, nervously crossed to where Gildig sat and spoke in low tones. Gildig nodded like a placid lion.

Other men entered; each glanced around the room, at the chandelier, then took seats. Presently the room held twenty or more.

Other conversations arose. Jarvis found himself next to a small, sturdy man with a round moon-face, a bulbous little paunch, a hooked little nose and dark, owlish eyes. He seemed disposed to speak, and Jarvis made such comments as seemed judicious. "A cold night, last, for those of us to see the red sunset."

Jarvis assented.

"A lucky planet to win free from, this," continued the round man. "I've been watching the Bulletin for three weeks now; if I don't join Belisarius—why, by the juice of Jonah, I'll take a workaway job on a packet."

Jarvis asked "Who is this Belisarius?"

The round man opened his

eyes wide. "Belisarius? It's well-known—he's Belson!"

"Belson?" Jarvis could not hold the surprised note out of his voice; the bruise on his hip began to jar and thud. "Belson?"

The round man had turned away his head, but was staring over the bridge of his little beak-nose. "Belson is an effective traveller, much respected."

"So I understand," said Jarvis.

"Rumor comes that he has suffered reverses—notably one such, two months gone, on the swamps of Fenn."

"How goes the rumor?" asked Jarvis.

"There is large talk, small fact," the round man replied gracefully. "And have you ever speculated on the concentration of talent in so small a one room? There is yourself. And my own humble talents—there is Omar Gildig—brawn like a Beshauer bull, a brain of guile. Over there is young Hancock McManus, an effective worker, and there—he who styles himself Lachesis, a metaphor. And I'll wager in all our aggregate pockets there's not twenty Juillard crowns!"

"Certainly not in mine," admitted Jarvis.

"This is our life," said the round man. "We live at the full—each minute an entity to be squeezed of its maximum; our moneys, our crowns, our credits

—they buy us great sweetness, but they are soon gone. Then Belisarius hints of brave goals, and we come, like moths to a flame!"

"I wonder," mused Jarvis.

"What's your wonder?"

"Belisarius surely has trusted lieutenants. . . . When he calls for travellers through the Farm Bulletin—there always is the chance of Authority participation."

"Perhaps they are unaware of the convention, the code."

"More likely not."

The round man shook his head, sighed. "A brave agent would come to the Old Solar Inn on this day!"

"There are such men."

"But they will not come to the shape-ups—and do you know why not?"

"Why not then?"

"Suppose they do—suppose they trap six men—a dozen."

"A dozen less to cope with."

"But the next time a shape-up is called, the travellers will prove themselves by the Test Supreme."

"And this is?" inquired Jarvis easily, though he knew quite well.

The round man explained with zest. "Each party kills in the presence of an umpire. The Authority will not risk the resumption of such tests; and so they allow the travellers to meet and

foregather in peace." The round man peered at Jarvis. "This can hardly be new information?"

"I have heard talk," said Jarvis.

The round man said, "Caution is admirable when not carried to an excess."

Jarvis laughed, showing his long, sharp teeth. "Why not use an excess of caution, when it costs nothing?"

"Why not?" assented the round man, and said no more to Jarvis.

A few moments later the inner door opened; an old man, slight, crochety, in tight black trousers and vest, peered out. His eyes were mild, his face was long, waxy, melancholy; his voice was suitably grave. "Your attention, if you please."

"By Crokus," muttered the round man, "Belson has hired undertakers to staff his conferences!"

The old man in black spoke on. "I will summon you one at a time, in the order of your arrival. You will be given certain tests, you will submit to certain interrogations. . . . Anyone who finds the prospect over-intimate may leave at this moment."

He waited. No one rose to depart, although scowls appeared, and Omar Gildig said, "Reasonable queries are resented by no one. If I find the interrogation

too searching—then I shall protest."

The old man nodded, "Very well, as you wish. First then—you, Paul Pulliam."

A slim, elegant man in wine-colored jacket and tight trousers rose to his feet, entered the inner room.

"So that is Paul Pulliam," breathed the round man. "I have wondered six years, ever since the Myknosis affair."

"Who is that old man—the undertaker?" asked Jarvis.

"I have no idea."

"In fact," asked Jarvis, "Who is Belson? What is Belson's look?"

"In truth," said the round man, "I know no more to that."

The second man was called, then the third, the fourth, then: "Gilbert Jarvis!"

Jarvis rose to his feet, thinking: how in thunder do they know *my first name*? He passed through into an anteroom, whose only furnishing was a scale. The old man in black said, "If you please, I wish to learn your weight."

Jarvis stepped on the scale; the dial glowed with the figure 163, which the old man recorded in a book. "Very well, now—I will prick your ear—"

Jarvis grabbed the instrument; the old man squawked, "Here, here, here!"

Jarvis inspected the bit of glass and metal, gave it back with a wolfish grin. "I am a man of caution; I'll have no drugs pumped into my ear."

"No, no," protested the old man, "I need but a drop to learn your blood characteristics."

"Why is this important?" asked Jarvis cynically. "It's been my experience that if a man bleeds, why so much the worse, but let him bleed till either he stops or he runs dry."

"Belisarius is a considerate master."

"I want no master," said Jarvis.

"Mentor, then—a considerate mentor."

"I think for myself."

"Devil drag me deathways!" exclaimed the old man, "you are a ticklish man to please." He put the drop from Jarvis' ear into an analyzer, peered at the dials. "Type O . . . Index 96 . . . Granuli B . . . Very good, Gilbert Jarvis, very good indeed!"

"Humph," said Jarvis, "is that all the test Belisarius gives a man—his weight, his blood?"

"No, no," said the old man earnestly, "these are but the preliminaries; but allow me to congratulate you, you are so far entirely suitable. Now—come with me and wait; in an hour we will have our lunch, and then discuss the remainder of the problem."

Of the original applicants only eight remained after the preliminary elimination. Jarvis noticed that all of the eight approximated his own weight, with the exception of Omar Gildig, who weighed two hundred fifty or more.

The old man in black summoned them to lunch; the eight filed into a round green dining-saloon; they took places at a round green table. The old man gave a signal and wine and appetizers appeared in the service slots. He put on an air of heartiness. "Let us forget the background of our presence here," he said. "Let us enjoy the good food and such fellowship as we may bring to the occasion."

Omar Gildig snorted, a vast grimace that pulled his nose down over his mouth. "Who cares about fellowship? We want to know that which concerns us. What is this affair that Belson plans for?"

The old man shook his head smilingly. "There are still eight of you—and Belisarius needs but four."

"Then get on with your tests; there are better things to be doing than jumping through these jackanape hoops."

"There have been no hoops so far," said the old man gently. "Bear with me only an hour longer; none of you eight will go

without your recompense, of one kind or another."

Jarvis looked from face to face. Gildig; sly, reckless old Tixon—or Captain Pardee, as he called himself; the round, owlish man; a blond, smiling youth like a girl in men's gear; two quiet nondescripts; a tall pencil-thin black, who might have been dumb for any word he spoke.

Food was served: small steaks of a local venison, a small platter of toasted pods with sauce of herbs and minced mussels. In fact, so small were the portions that Jarvis found his appetite merely whetted.

Next came glasses of frozen red punch, then came braised crescents of white flesh, each with a bright red nubbin at both ends, swimming in a pungent sauce.

Jarvis smiled to himself and glanced around the table. Gildig had fallen to with gusto, as had the thin dark-skinned man; one or two of the others were eating with more caution. Jarvis thought, I won't be caught quite so easily, and toyed with the food; and he saw from the corner of his eye that Tixon, the blond youth and the round man were likewise abstaining.

Their host looked around the table with a pained expression. "The dish, I see, is not popular."

The round man said plaintive-

ly, "Surely it's uncommon poor manners to poison us with the Fenn swamp-shrimp."

Gildig spat out a mouthful. "Poison!"

"Peace, Conrad, peace," said the old man, grinning. "These are not what you think them." He reached out a fork, speared one of the objects from the plate of Conrad, the round man, and ate it. "You see, you are mistaken. Perhaps these resemble the Fenn swamp-shrimp—but they are not."

Gildig looked suspiciously at his plate. "And what did you think they were?" he asked Conrad.

Conrad picked up one of the morsels, looked at it narrowly. "On Fenn when a man wants to put another man in his power for a day or a week, he seeks these—or shrimp like these—from the swamps. The toxic principle is in these red sacs." He pushed his plate away. "Swamp-shrimp or not, they still dull my appetite."

"We'll remove them," said the old man. "To the next dish, by all means—a bake of capons, as I recall."

The meal progressed; the old man produced no more wine—"because," he explained, "we have a test of skill approaching us; it's necessary that you have all faculties with you."

"A complicated system of filling out a roster," muttered Gildig.

The old man shrugged. "I act for Belisarius."

"Belson, you mean."

"Call him any name you wish."

Conrad, the round man, said thoughtfully, "Belson is not an easy master."

The old man looked surprised. "Does not Belson—as you call him—bring you large profits?"

"Belson allows no man's interference — and Belson never forgets a wrong."

The old man laughed a mournful chuckle. "That makes him an easy man to serve. Obey him, do him no wrongs—and you will never fear his anger."

Conrad shrugged, Gildig smiled. Jarvis sat watchfully. There was more to the business than filling out a roster, more than a profit to be achieved.

"Now," said the old man, "if you please, one at a time, through this door. Omar Gildig, I'll have you first."

The seven remained at the table, watching uneasily from the corners of their eyes. Conrad and Tixon—or Captain Pardee—spoke lightly; the blond youth joined their talk; then a thud caused them all to look up, the talk to stop short. After a pause, the conversation continued rather lamely.

The old man appeared. "Now you, Captain Pardee."

Captain Pardee—or Tixon—left the room. The six remaining listened; there were no further sounds.

The old man next summoned the blond youth, then Conrad, then one of the nondescripts, then the tall black man, the other nondescript, and finally returned to where Jarvis sat alone.

"My apologies, Gilbert Jarvis—but I think we are effecting a satisfactory elimination. If you will come this way. . . ."

Jarvis entered a long dim room.

The old man said, "This as I have intimated, is a test of skill, agility, resource. I presume you carry your favorite weapons with you?"

Jarvis grinned. "Naturally."

"Notice," said the old man, "the screen at the far end of this room. Imagine behind two armed and alert men who are your enemies, who are not yet aware of your presence." He paused; watched Jarvis, who grinned his humorless smile.

"Well, then, are you imagining the situation?"

Jarvis listened; did he hear breathing? There was the feel of stealth in the room, of mounting strain, expectancy.

"Are you imagining?" asked the old man. "They will kill you

if they find you. . . . They will kill you. . . ."

A sound, a rush—not from the end of the room—but at the side—a hurtling dark shape. The old man ducked; Jarvis jumped back, whipped out his weapon, a Parnassian sliver-spit. . . . The dark shape thumped with three internal explosions.

"Excellent," said the old man. "You have good reactions, Gilbert Jarvis—and with a sliver-spit too. Are they not difficult weapons?"

"Not to a man who knows their use; then they are most effective."

"An interesting diversity of opinion," said the old man. "Gildig, for instance, used a collapsible club. Where he had it hidden, I have no idea—a miracle of swiftness. Conrad was almost as adept with the shoot-blade as you are with the sliver-spit, and Noel, the blond youngster—he preferred a dammel-ray."

"Bulky," said Jarvis. "Bulky and delicate, with limited capacity."

"I agree," said the old man. "But each man to his own methods."

"It puzzles me," said Jarvis. "Where does he carry the weapon? I noticed none of the bulk of a dammel-ray on his person."

"He had it adjusted well,"

said the old man cryptically. "This way, if you please."

They returned to the original waiting room. Instead of the original twenty men, there were now but four: Gildig, old Tixon, the blond young Noel, and Conrad, the round man with the owlish face. Jarvis looked Noel over critically to see where he carried his weapon, but it was nowhere in evidence, though his clothes were pink, yellow and black weave, skin-tight.

The old man seemed in the best of spirits; his mournful jowls quivered and twitched. "Now, gentlemen, now—we come to the end of the elimination. Five men, when we need but four. One man must be dispensed with; can anyone propose a means to this end?"

The five men stiffened, looked sideways around with a guarded wariness, as the same idea suggested itself to each mind.

"Well," said the old man, "it would be one way out of the impasse, but there might be several simultaneous eliminations, and it would put Belisarius to considerable trouble."

No one spoke.

The old man mused, "I think I can resolve the quandary. Let us assume that all of us are hired by Belisarius."

"I assume nothing," growled Gildig. "Either I'm hired, or I'm

not! If I'm hired I want a retainer."

"Very well," said the old man. "You all are, then, hired by Belisarius."

"By Belson."

"Yes—by Belson. Here—" he distributed five envelopes—"here is earnest-money. A thousand crowns. Now, each and all of you are Belson's men. You understand what this entails?"

"It entails loyalty," intoned Tixon, looking with satisfaction into the envelope.

"Complete, mindless, unswerving loyalty," echoed the old man. "What's that?" he asked to Gildig's grumble.

Gildig said, "He doesn't leave a man a mind of his own."

"When he serves Belson, a man needs his mind only to serve. Before, and after, he is as free as air. During his employment, he must be Belson's man, an extension of Belson's mind. The rewards are great—but the punishments are certain."

Gildig grunted with resignation. "What next, then?"

"Now—we seek to eliminate the one superfluous man. I think now we can do it." He looked around the faces. "Gildig—Tixon—"

"Captain Pardee, call me—that's my name!"

"—Conrad—Noel—and Gilbert Jarvis."

"Well," said Conrad shortly, "get on with it."

"The theory of the situation," said the old man didactically, "is that now we are all Belson's loyal followers. Suppose we find a traitor to Belson, an enemy—what do we do then?"

"Kill him!" said Tixon.

"Exactly."

Gildig leaned forward, and the bulging muscles sent planes of soft light moving down his green suede jacket. "How can there be traitors when we are just hired?"

The old man looked mournfully at his pale fingers. "Actually, gentlemen, the situation goes rather deeper than one might suppose. This unwanted fifth man—the man to be eliminated—he happens to be one who has violated Belson's trust. The disposal of this man," he said sternly, "will provide an object lesson for the remaining four."

"Well," said Noel easily, "shall we proceed? Who is the betrayer?"

"Ah," said the old man, "we have gathered today to learn this very fact."

"Do you mean to say," snapped Conrad, "that this entire rigmarole is not to our benefit, but only yours?"

"No, no!" protested the old man. "The four who are selected will have employment—if I may

say, employment on the instant. But let me explain; the background is this: at a lonesome camp, on the marshes of Fenn, Belson had stored a treasure—a rare treasure! Here he left three men to guard. Two were known to Belson, the third was a new recruit, an unknown from somewhere across the universe.

"When the dawn was breaking this new man rose, killed the two men, took the treasure across the marsh to the port city Mommart, and there sold it. Belson's loyal lieutenant — myself — was on the planet. I made haste to investigate. I found tracks in the marsh. I established that the treasure had been sold. I learned that passage had been bought—and followed. Now, gentlemen," and the old man sat back, "we are all persons of discernment. We live for the pleasurable moment. We gain money, we spend money, at a rather predictable rate. Knowing the value of Belson's treasure, I was able to calculate just when the traitor would feel the pinch of poverty. At this time I baited the trap; I published the advertisement; the trap is sprung. Is that not clever? Admit it now!"

And he glanced from face to face.

Jarvis eased his body around in the chair to provide swifter scope for movement, and also to

ease his hip, which now throbbed painfully.

"Go on," said Gildig, likewise glaring from face to face.

"I now exercised my science. I cut turves from the swamp, those which held the tracks, the crushed reeds, the compressed moss. At the laboratory, I found that a hundred and sixty pounds pressure, more or less, might make such tracks. Weight—" he leaned forward to confide—" formed the basis of the first elimination. Each of you was weighed, you will recall, and you that are here—with the exception of Omar Gildig—fulfill the requirement."

Noel asked lightly, "Why was Gildig included?"

"Is it not clear?" asked the old man. "He can not be the traitor, but he makes an effective sergeant-at-arms."

"In other words," said Conrad dryly, "the traitor is either Tixon—I mean Captain Pardee, Noel, Jarvis or myself."

"Exactly," said the old man mournfully. "Our problem is reducing the four to one—and then, reducing the one to nothing. For this purpose we have our zealous sergeant-at-arms here—Omar Gildig."

"Pleased to oblige," said Gildig, now relaxed, almost sleepy.

The old man slid back a panel, drew with chalk on a board.

"We make a chart—so:"

	Weight	Food	Blood	Weapon
Captain Pardee				
Noel				
Conrad				
Jarvis				

and as he spoke he wrote the figures beside each name: "Captain Pardee: 162; Noel: 155; Conrad: 166, and Jarvis: 163. Next—each of you four were familiar with the Fenn swamp-shrimp, indicating familiarity with the Fenn swamps. So—a check beside each of your names." He paused to look around. "Are you attending, Gildig?"

"At your service."

"Next," said the old man, "there was blood on the ground, indicating a wound. It was not the blood of the two slain men—nor blood from the treasure. Therefore it must be blood from the traitor; and today I have taken blood from each of the four. I leave this column blank. Next—to the weapons. The men were killed, very neatly, very abruptly—with a Parnassian sliver, Tixon uses a JAR-gun; Noel, dammel-ray; Conrad, a shoot-blade—and Jarvis, a sliver-spit. So—an X beside the name of Jarvis!"

Jarvis began drawing himself up. "Easy," said Gildig. "I'm watching you, Jarvis."

Jarvis relaxed, smiling a wolfish grin.

The old man, watching him from the corner of his eye, said, "This, of course, is hardly conclusive. So to the blood. In the blood are body-cells. The cells contain nuclei, with genes—and each man's genes are distinctive. So now with the blood—"

Jarvis, still smiling, spoke. "You find it to be mine?"

"Exactly."

"Old man—you lie. I have no wound on my body."

"Wounds heal fast, Jarvis."

"Old man—you fail as Belson's trusted servant."

"Eh? And how?"

"Through stupidity. Perhaps worse."

"Yes? And precisely?"

"The tracks . . . In the laboratory you compressed turves of the swamp. You found you needed weight of one hundred and sixty pounds to achieve the effect of the Fenn prints."

"Yes. Exactly."

"Fenn's gravity is six-tenths Earth standard. The compression of one sixty pounds on Fenn is

better achieved by a man of two hundred and forty or two-fifty pounds—such as Gildig."

Gildig half-raised. "Do you dare to accuse me?"

"Are you guilty?"

"No."

"You can't prove it."

"I don't need to prove it! Those tracks might be made by a lighter man carrying the treasure. How much was the weight?"

"A light silken treasure," said the old man. "No more than a hundred pounds."

Tixon drew back to a corner. "Jarvis is guilty!"

Noel threw open his gay coat, to disclose an astonishing contrivance: a gun muzzle protruding from his chest, a weapon surprisingly fitted into his body. Now Jarvis knew where Noel carried his dammel-ray.

Noel laughed. "Jarvis — the traitor!"

"No," said Jarvis, "you're wrong. I am the only loyal servant of Belson's in the room. If Belson were near, I would tell him about it."

The old man said quickly, "We've heard enough of his wriggling. Kill him, Gildig."

Gildig stretched his arm; from under his wrist, out his sleeve shot a tube of metal three feet long, already swinging to the pull of Gildig's wrist. Jarvis sprang back, the tube struck him

on the bruised hip; he shot the sliver-spit. Gildig's hand was gone—exploded.

"Kill, kill," sang the old man, dodging back.

The door opened; a sedate handsome man came in. "I am Belson."

"The traitor, Belson," cried the old man. "Jarvis, the traitor!"

"No, no," said Jarvis. "I can tell you better."

"Speak, Jarvis—your last moment!"

"I was on Fenn, yes! I was the new recruit, yes! It was my blood, yes! . . . But traitor, no! I was the man left for dead when the traitor went."

"And who is this traitor?"

"Who was on Fenn? Who was quick to raise the cry for Jarvis? Who knew of the treasure?"

"Pah!" said the old man, as Belson's mild glace swung toward him.

"Who just now spoke of the sun rising at the hour of the deed?"

"A mistake!"

"A mistake, indeed!"

"Yes, Finch," said Belson to the old man, "how did you know so closely the hour of the theft?"

"An estimate, a guess, an intelligent deduction."

Belson turned to Gildig, who had been standing stupidly clutching the stump of his arm. "Go, Gildig; get yourself a new

hand at the clinic. Give them the name Belisarius."

"Yes, sir." Gildig tottered out.

"You, Noel," said Belson, "Book you a passage to Acher-nar; go to Pasatiempo, await word at the Auberge Bacchanal."

"Yes, Belson." Noel departed.

"Tixon—"

"Captain Pardee is my name, Belson."

"—I have no need for you now, but I will keep your well-known abilities in mind."

"Thank you sir, good-day." Tixon departed.

"Conrad, I have a parcel to be travelled to the city Sudanapolis on Earth; await me at Suite RS above."

"Very good, Belson." Conrad wheeled, marched out the door.

"Jarvis."

"Yes, Belson."

"I will speak to you further today. Await me in the lobby."

"Very well." Jarvis turned, started from the room. He heard Belson say quietly to the old man, "And now, Finch, as for you—" and then further words and sounds were cut off by the closing of the door.

*The third war was over, and America had won.
That was why America had to die. . . .*

THE GUILTY

By ALFRED COPPEL

STANDING at the wide curving window, John Kane stared down at the tag end of the parade in the street below. Faintly, the sound of the marching band came through the transparent plastic. Kane's brows knit in perplexity. The sound should have been jubilant, martial. It wasn't. It sounded plaintive.

"Victory Day," said the flat, bitter voice behind him. "Wave the flag. Beat the drum. Be proud. You particularly, Johnny. Johnny-on-the-spot."

Kane turned away from the window. The apartment was bleak in the early twilight. Professor Conlan was an indistinct shape near the cold fireplace, the ice in his drink tinkling softly in the gloom.

"Der Tag," Conlan said. "The anniversary of the Great Victory. Did you read the papers today, Johnny? A hundred and fifty more victors blew their brains out. Proud?"

"Lay off, Conlan!" Kane's voice was tight and angry.

"I'm sorry, Johnny. Maybe it soothes my soul to maintain the fiction that you are more to blame than I," Conlan said. He smiled faintly into the dimness. "After all, you were in on it. I was safely at home in a classroom mouthing nonsense." He lifted his glass to the fading light from the window and stared at the amber liquid. "What do the vintners buy, Johnny? Medals and brass bands? Atoms?"

"You're drinking like a fish these days," Kane said shortly. "When the hell are you going back to work?"

"Work? What for, Johnny? Professors of Philosophy are a dime a dozen on any street corner. Psychiatrists are what's needed. Or witch doctors."

Kane found a chair in the dimness and sank down. There was a faintly sickish feeling in the pit of his stomach. "What's happening to us, Connie? What's wrong?" He took a cigarette from the box on the table and struck a light. The room flared

into high relief. Kane stared in horror at the Professor's face. It had happened again. He had looked into the face of a—murderer. The match fell from his nerveless fingers and went out. His hands were trembling and the breath rasped in his throat.

"You see?" Conlan's voice came flat and toneless. "We've reached the end of the line. Can't you feel it? I can. My hands are bloody. Yours are too."

"Don't talk like a fool!" Kane's insides were taut with doubt and fear. "End of the line, hell! Why—"

Conlan laughed. It was an explosive, bitter sound in the still room. "Go on. What were you going to say?"

Kane shook his head slowly. He knew Conlan was right. The proof was in the tight faces of the people one saw on the streets, in the haunted furtiveness of their eyes. Every man and woman in America lived with horror now; even the children felt it, and in some strange way they understood. Conscience—it spread over the nation like a pall. Suicides were increasing. Progress was no more. It was a blind alley.

Kane felt the need to protest. "This is crazy, Connie," he said thickly, "A nation doesn't just quit wanting to go on. Not now. Not when it's supreme. Two hundred million human beings

don't just curl up in a corner and stop existing. It's against nature. It's never—"

"—never happened before? You're wrong, John. This began happening when the first hairy primate ripped the throat out of his brother with his teeth. Every battle of every war brought it nearer. Each time a man lost his life to another it grew stronger. John Donne foresaw it centuries ago when he wrote that 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.'

"You could see it after the Second War. Remember the aid we sent to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? The medical missions, the financial aid? We were feeling the mental pressure of the destruction we had wrought and trying to ease it. For a time it looked as though we might succeed. But in spite of being 'involved in mankind' the mindlessness and stupidity of us all drove us into the Third War. And this creeping horror in our minds leaped into the open full grown after Victory Day. That was the finisher. You don't dance a *Danse Macabre* without paying the fiddler, John."

Kane's lips trembled slightly as he said: "Who can make us pay anything? We—"

"No one except ourselves," Conlan said. "In our own fumbling way we discovered a defense

for weapons of mass destruction. Remember that a proper 'defense' includes a form of retaliation. That's what has happened to us. Morality was the only defense against the Third War. The threat was insufficient to keep the peace. Now we pay."

"That's theological mumbo-jumbo," Kane said shortly.

Conlan filled his glass again. Kane could hear the liquor gurgling in the bottleneck.

"Is it mumbo-jumbo? I don't think so. You don't either. What did you feel, Johnny, while you sat up there in the nose of your bomber, your hands on the bomb-sight, waiting to drop your missile on—"

"Novgorod!"

"Tail gunner to pilot. Say again. I didn'a get that."

"I said Novgorod. That's our target. Sealed orders have just been opened."

"Hell, I thought we'd get Moscow."

"Navigator to Tail gunner. Don't cry, baby. They'll have fighters up for you anyway."

Kane crouched over his radar scope in the huge bomber's nose and listened to the crackling conversation in the intercom.

This wasn't real, Kane told himself. The faraway keening of the jets and the throbbing life of the bomber were all an illusion.

They hadn't really attacked New York and Seattle and Washington. The towering mushrooms were fantasies out of a sick nightmare. Any moment now, he'd awake and find it all a dream.

Woodenly, Kane crawled back through the tunnel into the bomb-bay. Steadying himself against the motion of the airplane he inspected the sleek missile. It lay inert, helpless. The fuze reclined in its special cradle.

"Going to arm it?" It was the parasite-fighter pilot who spoke.

"Yes," Kane said. "I'll arm it now. I. P. is only ten minutes away."

The parasite pilot's face twitched with excitement. "Those lousy rats. We'll give them something back, damn them! I wish I had your job, Kane. I'd like to drop this baby on them with my bare hands." His teeth showed white in the darkness. "I hate them. Hate them like I hate snakes—"

Kane was surprised to hear himself say: "They're human beings . . . like us."

The fresh face distorted momentarily into a mask of surprised outrage. Nothing more was said. The parasite pilot snorted derisively and turned away. Kane set to work arming the Bomb.

After all, he told himself, they attacked us. Lousy Commies.

They attacked us without warning and killed thousands of Americans. This is what they have coming.

The threads of the fuze casing jammed and Kane tried to force them. The fuze would not seat. He removed it and began again. Two wrongs don't make one right, he thought bleakly.

They shouldn't have attacked us. The Germans shouldn't have attacked Poland. Or France or Belgium. Agincourt was wrong—a crime against mankind. The Crusaders had no rights in the Holy Land. Links in a chain stretching all the way from Cain and Abel to this bomber in the sky over Russia. The night is dark, he thought shakily, and getting darker—

The fuze seated. The Bomb was ready. Kane turned away and crawled back through the tunnel to his station in the long nose of the bomber.

"Navigator to Bombardier. Initial Point in ten minutes."

Kane acknowledged. The Bomb was ready. The time for waking from this nightmare must come soon. He stared out into the blackness ahead.

Miles below, the earth lay still and quiet under a mantle of snow. They attacked us, he told himself again, they attacked us with treachery and fire. It was true and there was no answer but

retaliation. They asked for it, he thought. Now they'll get it. But *who* will get it? Simple people. People like himself. Children playing or sleeping. Men and women in their beds loving or sleeping or quarreling. People like the people who died in Washington, Seattle, New York. The Bomb would make no distinction—

This thing is wrong—it could have been stopped somewhere. Before Cain, or after Agincourt. Somewhere, somehow it should have been stopped. But it was too late, too late—

"Target ahead! Pilot to Bombardier. Take it."

Kane's hands performed their routine tasks. The bombsight between his knees muttered softly. The scanning eye of the radar-scope picked up the outlines of the blacked-out city.

"Fighters! Twelve o'clock low!" The jarring bark of the forward guns filled the ship. Kane smelled the acrid stench of cordite.

"Launch parasite-fighter!"

"Fighter away!"

Kane sat in the exposed darkness of the nose and watched the radarscope. With inhuman calmness and dexterity the bombsight guided the bomber over the heart of the cowering city.

Outside, the night became a streaked confusion. The searing

blast of rocket trails traced insane patterns against the faint stars. Dark shapes closed in and vanished in gouts of white fire.

"Parasite to bomber. Scratch one—"

The transmission cut off sharply as a yellow flower of fire flared in the darkness.

"They got the parasite!"

Something struck in the bomber's broad wing and the world rocked crazily. The bombsight corrected for the damage and continued inexorably toward the city's heart.

It was coming now. Kane watched the warning lights change color on his control box. Wind shrieked through the airplane as the huge bomb-doors opened. A green light went amber. Kane could feel his heart pounding. He could still stop it. He could still save a hundred thousand lives with a touch of his hand. The light flickered once. He stared in horrified fascination. The light went red and the airplane surged upward, freed of its cargo.

Kane felt tears streaking his face. They were like icy fire in the cold. His goggles misted. Oh, God, he thought, Oh, God. The Bomb was falling now, through the darkness and the frantic defenders. All over this beleaguered country the Bombs were falling like rain—

The shouldn't have attacked us like they did, Kane said aloud. Those children sleeping down there shouldn't have bombed us. Commies, lousy Commies, Oh, God look out look out—

The night became a hideous, brilliant day. Sun-white flame rolled across the face of the land below. A roiling, writhing column arose into the still dazzling air. Kane stared in horror at the mushroom that he had planted on the breast of the earth with his own hands. I'll never sleep again, he told himself, I'll never sleep again—

"But, of course, you did sleep again," Conlan said, "We all slept again. It was a great Victory. They attacked us and we retaliated. In one night we wiped two hundred million human beings off the face of the earth. First the Bombs, then the biotoxins. We transformed one eighth of the earth's surface into a radiating desert."

"What else could we do?" Kane demanded.

"Nothing. The pattern was set too long ago. We had all kinds of chances to break out of it but we failed. We did the only thing that could be expected of animals."

"But we're *not* animals!"

"You don't really believe that, Johnny. You see, there was only

one thing that allowed us to maintain the fiction that we were more than beasts. Morality. Morality was the wall we built to confine the devils of bestiality in our brains. And Victory Day shattered the wall. It proved us for the last and most conclusive time—beasts. Only conscience remains to us, of all those traits we had bestowed upon ourselves. But conscience without a solid morality behind it is simply a torture wheel." Conlan stood up and moved toward the door of the apartment. "There's only one escape from this mass guilt-consciousness. I think you know what that is. You see, Johnny, I saw the gun in your study desk—"

"Connie, I wouldn't—"

Conlan shrugged in the darkness. "It wouldn't matter if you did, John. No one would blame you, of all people. You were there. Johnny-on-the-spot."

Kane stared through the wide curving window into the lowering night. The rain had begun again and was pattering against the pane. "Is that the answer, Connie?"

"There is no answer, Johnny. We're through as a nation and as a race. As a species, too, I think. From here there's only

one way left to go—down. We had chances. Millions of them. And we blew them all. The book is closed. What comes now is anticlimax." He waved vaguely and opened the door into the hallway. "What you want is peace now, John. The nothingness of before the womb. No one would blame you. The end is the same for all of us now. Good-bye, Johnny."

"Connie!" Kane was at the door suddenly, searching his friend's face. "You aren't—"

"Going to kill myself?" Conlan's face looked aged and gray. "Not yet. But someday, maybe. I don't think I'll like living in a blind alley."

Kane watched him go slowly down the long hallway, and when he was gone, Kane returned to his dark room. He stood by the window, looking out into the deserted rainy night. Somewhere across the curve of the earth a land lay sterile under its white shroud of snow. He had killed it. A hunted guilt seemed to be plucking at him from out of the darkness of the night.

In the other room lay the key to peace. A gun. One last murder, Cain, he told himself. One last murder, one more, one more . . .

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